

SRI KASI MATH - TIRUPPANANDAL

*PEEPS INTO THE*

# **CULTURAL HERITAGE OF HINDUISM**

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M. ARUNACHALAM

## THE KASI MATH

Saint Kumara gurupara swami travelled all the way to Banaras from the Kaveri delta in the middle of the 17th century and by his erudition and eloquence and the Grace of Lord Visvanatha expounded the philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta to the people of Banaras and founded at Kedar Ghat there the Kumaraswami Math. Its headquarters were later shifted to Tiruppanandal in the Tanjavur district. The Math is performing valuable religious, charitable and literary services from both Banaras and Tiruppanandal. The present head of the Math is Sri-la-Sri Kasivasi Muthukumara swami Tambiran Swamihal learned in both the Saiva religion and the Tamil literature. He had graciously conducted in March 1982 the 76th Anniversary Conference of the Madras Saiva Siddhanta Maha Samajam in the Banaras Math at his expense.

This Volume is released by him on the occasion of the World Hindu Conference held in Colombo in April 1982.

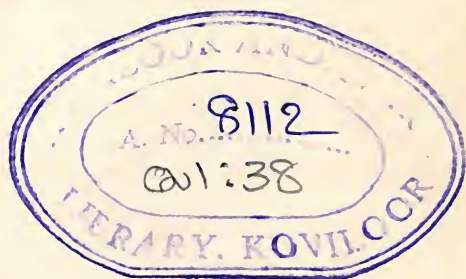


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CULTURAL HERITAGE  
OF HINDUISM



M. ARUNACHALAM

*Under the orders of His Holiness Sri-La-Sri*  
KASIVASI MUTHUKUMARASWAMI TAMBIRAN  
SWAMIHAL

*Head of the Kasi Mutt - Tiruppanandal*  
*Tanjavur District*  
**April 1982**



*First Edition, April 1982*

**Rupees Twenty five only**

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*Published by*

**THE KASI MATH**

**Tiruppanandal, Pin 612 504**

**Tanjavur District, Tamil nadu**

**KALAKSHETRA PUBLICATIONS PRESS**  
**Tiruvanmiyur - Madras 600 041**

## FOREWORD

**Sri-La-Sri Kasivasi Muthukumaraswami Tambiran Swamihal**  
Head of the Kasi Math, Tiruppanandal

Many lovers of Hinduism and Saiva people had been feeling the need for a short introduction to the Religion and Culture of the Hindus which can serve both as a source of pleasant reading and as a source of information to the foreign visitors in India and in Sri Lanka. We appreciated the need and commissioned Tiru M. Arunachalam to do the work. He has written the volume neatly in a short time, covering the many facets of the Hindu Religion and Culture in an easily readable language, highlighting the important landmarks in both and has also succeeded in getting it through print in the short time available.

We are happy that the volume is issued under the auspices of the Kasi Math, founded by Sri Kumaragurupara Swami, in the seventeenth century in the city of Banaras on the banks of the Ganges during a critical period in the history of Hinduism in all India. A short account of Saint Kumara gurupara swami, and his contribution to the religion and culture of the Tamil people including the Tamil Language may be found at pages 150-151.

May the Grace of Lord Muruha of Tiruchendur, our patron deity, be on all who happen to study this book and may this book help towards a better understanding of the Hindu tradition, way of life and culture by the others.

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## PREFACE

One of the great living cultures of the world is the Hindu Culture of India. The present culture of the Tamil people living any where-South India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and else where-is a composite of two distinct cultures-the Vedic culture of North India and the ancient indigenous culture of the Tamil people in South India. The two ancient languages of India are Sanskrit and Tamil. Of the two, Sanskrit is not a spoken language today, while Tamil an ancient classical language has continued as a spoken language too for over 2500 years of recorded history – a rare phenomenon of classicism and modernism. The ancient religion and culture of India formed the Hindu culture which is a continuation of both. The Hindu culture does not mean only the Vedic culture. That culture has adopted a considerable part of an ancient Tamil culture which was by all accounts pre-Vedic. The foreigners had called the composite culture Hindu and the name continues.

This book is not history; it is merely a peep into the many facets of the great cultural legacy of the Hindu people with a special emphasis on Tamilnadu. It aims at presenting the Hindu culture in twelve sections. The First Section deals with the land and its history, highlighting the different lines of rulers who had moulded the Tamil people and their goals in life and had nourished the Tamil culture at different periods, both of peace and of ferment.

Section Two deals with Religion; Saivism and Vaishnavism are the main religions in Hinduism today, with probably of Saktam the rare practice in some pockets. This section deals with these and their basic scriptures. Section Three is concerned with deities worshipped by the Tamil people. It draws a line between what is Supreme and are the manifestations of the Supreme, and what are mere accretions of a later day, unrelated to philosophical concepts. Section Four highlights some Temples, which had played a keyrole on all Hinduism and continue to do so to this day. The Tamils had been defined as a race of temple builders and there can be no greater compliment to their culture. Section Five deals with Festivals which make both religion and temples pulsate with life and activity and are sources of joy all round.



Sections Six, Seven and Eight speak of the great Preceptors of Tamilnad - the Saivas and the Vaishnavas and the Saints of an earlier and a later day. Section Nine deals with some aspects of Tamil literature and literary personalities. Section Ten deals with philosophy and gives a general outline of the Hindu philosophy as understood by the Tamil people in general; sections Eleven and Twelve deal with the Arts and Culture; some of the chapters here, which should have found a place in the earlier sections, are included here to avoid any omission.

There is a particular scheme and order in the writing of the subjects here and their page arrangement. Each paper or subject begins on the left hand page at the top under its own title and ends at the bottom of the right hand page, so that the two pages together give a full account of one subject. A reader can open the book at any page, read the two pages that open up before him and have the satisfaction of having read and enjoyed one complete article. No article is carried over to a third page. The whole book has been planned and arranged to help easy reading for persons outside the Hindu fold. Though many of the subjects are of a serious nature, they have been so written and presented that any person having a few minutes to spare can go through a short paper which is complete in itself, and can profit by the reading.

There may be a few repetitions which have been necessitated by the sectional arrangement of the different subjects.

Many more subjects could have been included here adding to its value. But exigencies of time and of space have restricted the writing and the author believes there is a wholeness in the volume as completed and offered now. The culture and religion have been highlighted here of course with an accent on the Tamil region.

I am thankful to the Kalakshetra Publications Press, Tiruvannamipur (Madras), for their neat execution of the printing.

This book has taken shape under a suggestion from His Holiness Sri-La-Sri Kasivasi Muthukumaraswami Tambiran Swamihal, Head of the Kasi Math, Tiruppanandal, founded in Banaras in the middle of the 17th century, who has also undertaken its publication. May it serve the purpose of introducing the most ancient and yet living culture of the Tamil people to other peoples in India and Sri Lanka abroad!

SECTION 1  
HISTORY



## THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

The southern part of India is known from the very ancient days as the Tamil land. Its limits are Venkatam (modern Tirupati) in the north, Cape Comorin in the south and the present Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea in the east and the west respectively. Tamil literary tradition says that there was a wide stretch of land south of Cape Comorin now termed Lemuria, where Pandiyan cities flourished, many hills and rivers existed, and many divisions of territories also existed, and that the language was in a highly cultivated state. All this is said to have been deluged by the sea in times long past.

The South of India could have been the cradle of the human race and the peninsular India is today substantially the same as it had existed before the beginnings of life. The present inhabitants of Tamilnad, the Tamilians, are considered by most to be indigenous to the soil; they had not migrated to this land from any other area.

The modern island of Sri Lanka had been part of sub-merged Lemuria. When the entire mass of land disappeared, this land which was on a high level was left as a small piece at the tip of the remaining land namely modern South India.

From the very early days the country was divided into three territorial units – the Sera, the Pandiya and the Chola territories; their capital cities were Vanji, Madurai and Puhar. This division existed till about the 3rd century A.D., when the Pallavas came up in the north, with Kanchi as their capital. The Pallava area was known as the Tondainad and gradually it expanded towards the south, very soon completely overrunning the Chola territory. The Rivers Kaveri of the Cholas and the Vaigai and the Porunai of the Pandiyas had acquired great literary and cultural fame. All the three states together constituted the Tamilnad and had considerable overseas trade. Puhar or Kaverippattinam (Chola), Korkai and Tondi (Pandiya), and Musiri (Sera) were the important sea ports of the respective areas. Trade was carried on with Greece, Rome, Egypt and Arabia in the west and China and the Eastern Archipelago in the east. The later Chola monarchs conquered overseas territories and spread there Tamilian culture and civilization, and the Tamilian religion and way of life.

The Pandiyan pearls were famous throughout the world. Tamilian textiles were the most coveted article of merchandise in the west. Metal coins were in use; the insignia of the Princes was



stamped on them. Customs levies were made on the incoming articles. The kings had their own separate flags and court bards. There was survey of land and the sciences of mathematics and astronomy were well advanced. Besides cotton, silk and wool were also in use. Mudpots, and brass and bronze vessels were in use. The four-fold armies were maintained. Gold and gems were used in ornaments. Education was also well advanced; the teacher had the greatest esteem in society. Elders were always respected. The family was the unit of life and, though polygamy was practised, monogamy was the rule. Medicine was a specialised science. Music and dance were at the peak of their glory. Men took part in serious manly games. Light games like the balls were set apart for women. Architecture also was well developed. Drainage schemes were in vogue in large cities. Mechanical swimming pools, public parks and the like were there for recreation, for men as well as for women. All took part in important monthly festivities of a social and religious nature.

A happy householder's life, with children was the ideal, though the ascetic was greatly venerated. Feeding the needy was considered the greatest of virtues. The highest moral code was practised in battles and in warfare. People believed in a higher power which governed their destinies and believed in *karma*. Though castes (not *varnas*) existed, they were not rigid; in arts and letters, in love of God and in the capacity for action, caste was no bar. We meet with the worship of Vishnu, Muruha, Siva and Sakti very often; but mention of the Jina or the Buddha is absent. Valour and honour were considered more precious than the very life.

The rulers were invariably the upholders of honour and justice. Chivalry was the rule and women were held in great esteem. They had then equal rights with men. The sense of patriotism was high. Marriage was considered a solemn union which nothing could break. Agriculture was the main stay of the people. A regular tax was paid to the king for the benefit of his administration. Even in wars, the fighting forces never harmed cattle, women, the enlightened persons, the sick, children and similar others.

Truthfulness, gratitude and respect for elders were considered noble traits. Righteousness, fear of God and service to fellowmen were the most cherished virtues. The dictum 'work is worship' ruled the society.

## THE HISTORY OF TAMILNAD

Historians had called the Tamil people a Dravidian race and because it had not been possible to identify or derive the Tamil from any of the known races of the world, there is considerable confusion in saying who they were and what the land of their origin was. Yet the view is gaining ground that they were autochthonous to peninsular India. The theory of a submerged continent which existed in continuation of the present Kanyakumari cape is also gaining ground. Writers of earlier Tamil literary history have given an account of the two Tamil academies (or universities) founded in the cities of South Madurai and Kapatapuram, which were shifted to the present city of Madurai in the Third academy after the first two had been submerged by the sea. The academies were patronized by the Pandiya rulers.

The Third Academy is believed to have existed between the centuries 3rd B.C. to 2nd A.D. and considerable historical material is available from the literature of the period known now as the *Sangham* poetry. We know that along with the Pandiyas, the Seras and the Cholas were the crowned monarchs of the period ruling from the cities of Madurai, Vanji and Puhar-the Southern, Western, and Eastern and Central regions of Tamilnad.

The peace and progress of the southern region were marred for a period of three centuries (250-575 A.D.) by the seizure of power at Madurai by the clan of Kalabhras but they were suppressed by Pandiyan Kadunkon.

From about the 3rd century onwards the Pallavas had come to power at Kanchipuram and the area round it came to be called the Tondai mandalam. Mahendravarma pallava was a contemporary of St. Appar and Narasimha Pallava, his son, ruled in the days of Jnanasambandhar. His commander known in the Saiva world as Paranjoti had captured Vatapi, the head quarters of the Western Chalukyas (642 A.D.). Vikramaditya, the Western Chalukya monarch, marched on Kanchi in the days of Rajasimha but marvelling at the glory of his Kailasanathar temple, left the city of Kanchi unharmed. Nandi III was also a great patron of letters. This dynasty ended by the close of the 9th century.

Vijayalaya defeated the Muttarayar clan in 846 and laid the foundation for the great Imperial dynasty of the Cholas in Tanjavur which lasted till 1279. All the Chola rulers had been eminent warriors and patrons of religion, literature and the arts. Rajaraja I and his son Rajendra I were great warriors who had conquered the



eastern archipelago with their naval fleet - such areas as modern Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Singapore, Lanka etc. All the rulers were staunch Saivas giving liberally to the Saiva temples and also to Vaishnava and Buddha temples. The volume of literature that grew under their patronage is vast.

The Pandiyas stepped in on the extinction of the Chola dynasty, but the wars between the two sons of Maravarman Kulasekhara in the opening years of the 14th century brought Alauddin's general to the Madurai city which he razed to the ground, including the great Minakshi temple. There was a Sultanate at Madurai for a short period after which Kumara Kampanna, the Vijayanagar general, drove out the Muslims and established there the Vijayanagar rule. However when the Talikottah battle sealed the fate of Vijayanagar, again Madurai suffered a very uncertain rule caused by many factors. Finally the Nayaks were in possession.

Tirumalai nayak (1523-59) was the greatest of them. He is known for his patronage to arts and letters and for his architecture. There was considerable Telugu infiltration in society and in the language during the Nayak rule.

The west coast of Tamilnad, because of its natural isolation through its geographical situation, had gradually got itself separated from the main stream of Tamilnad life, its politics, religion and culture, from the 9th century onwards and had become a separate state calling itself the Keralanad, and its language Malayalam.

The Tenkasi Pandiyas, descendants of those that fled Madurai in the early 14th century had a useful rule extending patronage to arts and letters till the end of the 16th century.

Tanjavur became a Mahratta principality from 1677 and there had been many eminent men in that line. Some were responsible for giving enormous help to the Christian missionaries which resulted in large scale conversions.

The depredations of Hyder Ali and his son Tippu into the Tamil country from Mysore in the 18th century resulted in conversions to Islam at the point of the sword. The Carnatic wars between rival muslim chiefs made life uncertain and naturally people were yearning for peace and quiet. This was granted to them in the 19th century when the factions among the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British ended and the British, by the most ruthless means, established themselves as the overlords of all South India and the whole of India till August 1947 when India attained complete freedom through a long drawn peaceful struggle.

## THE PANDIYAS

The Pandiyas could have been the earliest rulers of Tamilnad and they ruled over the modern districts of Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari in the extreme south. Their capital city was the modern Madurai; their banner had the fish on it and their symbolic flower was the margosa. Their land was usually designated as the *Sen-Tamil nadu* and the *Kanni nadu*, by virtue of Sakti Minakshi having ruled there as the daughter of a Pandiya. Korkai on the east coast was their seaport. They called themselves as of the Chandrakula. River Vaihai flows through Madurai and Porunai (Tamraparni) further south is also celebrated as a Pandiya river. The Pandiyan pearl was traded to distant classical lands like Greece and Rome. There are a number of Saiva and Vaishnava shrines here which had been sanctified in the hymns of the Nayanmar and the Alvar. Manikkavacakar, author of Tiruvacakam, and Periyalvar, Andal and Nammalvar of the Vaishnava Canon were born here.

Tamil literary tradition would hold that the Pandiyas had established two universities (academies) at South Madurai and Kapatapuram which existed in the submerged continent of Lemuria. Kapatapuram is mentioned by Valmiki in his *Ramayana*. After the deluge, one Pandiya established the third university at modern Madurai which lasted from about 300 B.C. to 250 A.D. The Sangham poetry refers to many Pandiya rulers and their sacrifices.

The land was overrun by a clan of marauders called Kalabhras by about 250 A.D. and, till 575 when Pandiya Kadumkon wrested the land from them, they held sway over Madurai. It was a dark age in which all vestiges of Tamil literature, culture, language and religion were suppressed by them. Many illustrious Pandiyas followed in the line of Kadumkon and their rule lasted with varying fortunes upto the opening years of the 14th century.

Legends would say that Lord Siva as Sundaresa came down on earth, married the ruling Pandiya Princess and himself ruled over the land. His sports, called the 64 exploits, are the subject of several fine epic poems in the Tamil language. *Periya puranam* says that the Saiva Saint Tiru Jnanasambandar brought back the king to Saivism from Jainism. The king is identified as Maravarman Arikesari (640-670). This act ushered in a reign of the Saiva religion in the country. Srimaran (835-862) is the ruler who recognized the devotion of Periyalvar and glorified him. Two Varaguna Pandiyas of the 9th century were great heroes in history.



The second was the patron of St. Manikkavachakar. Earlier he had defeated the rising Chola, Aditta, in the Idavai battle field but later he was defeated by the same Aditta with the help of the Pallava forces at Purambiyam (880 A.D.). This sealed the rule of the Pandiyas over Chola territory and paved the way for Aditta and his successors to establish a glorious Chola empire at Tanjavur. The Pandiyas of this period were not of much consequence. However the Chola dynasty was declining by the middle of the 13th century. Maravarma Sundara Pandiya was a great warrior. He subdued the Chola and destroyed everything of value in that land. Maravarman Kulasekhara annexed the Chola territories in 1279. But his sons quarrelled among themselves and at the invitation of his younger son, Malikkaffur, the commander of Alauddin khilji marched on Madurai and destroyed everything there including the Minakshi temple. The convoy which carried the spoils of the Madurai Pandiya Kingdom which he sent to Delhi was miles long.

Kumara Kampannan, general of the Vijayanagar forces drove out the Muslim rule in Madurai and re-established the Hindu rule. But the Pandiyas had been gone from there for good. The descendants of those rulers that fled the city ruled over small principalities like Tenkasi and Sankarankoil, extending their patronage to religion, temples and poetry. Even they disappeared from the political scene in the 17th century.

The early Pandiya rule over Madurai was a golden era in Tamil letters. Besides poetry, music and dance had received great encouragement from them. The Kalugumalai cave temple was scooped out by them. This is comparable to the Pallava rock-cut temples but there seems to have been no distinctive style as the Pandiyan architecture.

The Pandiyas had a good and effective system of administration of their territories dividing them into convenient districts. They collected taxes in kind and cash. Customs duties were levied. Land was measured and boundaries marked with stone. Temple lands were made tax free. Weights and measures were standardized and coins were in use.

The fourfold armies were maintained. Cavalry was prized high. Industries prospered and there was a flourishing sea-faring trade. There were village sabhas looking after village affairs. Epigraphic evidence in the form of temple inscriptions and copper plate grants are available which give us a full picture of life then. A Mahabharata legend would say that Arjuna, wooed and wed one Pandiya princess during his tirtta-yatrai.

## THE SERAS

The Seras were one of the three ancient ruling dynasties of Tamil nad, and they ruled over the west coast, in the modern Kerala region. Some parts of modern Nilgiri, Coimbatore and Salem districts might have formed part of the Sera country. It was a rich and fertile land between the sea and the hills, enriched by rivers and sea ports. The Seras had their capital at Vanji; their banner was the bow; and their floral emblem was the palmyrah spathe. The fortunes of the ancient Seras had very often changed and so it is hard to define the boundaries.

There have been many distinguished kings on the Sera throne. The Asokan edicts mention the Sera as the Kerala putra. A Sera is said to have fed the warring Pandavas and Kauravas during the 18 days' battle and he was thenceforth known as Perumsotru-udiyān, the Udiyan who did the great feeding. Some kings like Palai Padiya Perum Kadumko had been eminent poets themselves and many songs of the Sangham poetry had been composed in their glory. *Paditruppattu* (the Ten tens) was written in praise of the Sera rulers. It is an ancient work, historically valuable.

Seraman Kanaikkal Irumporai was a great warrior but in a battle with Cholan Senganan of Uraiyyur he was defeated and taken prisoner. He was thirsty and asked for water one day in prison but the warder did not oblige immediately. Feeling vexed in the matter at his own state of captivity, he wrote a verse on the subject and gave up his life. Another version of the story would say that his friend the poet Poihaiyar sang a poem of praise in Tamil on Senganan's victorious battle and from the pleased Chola King, secured the release of his friend Kanaikkal.

Seran Senkuttuvan is said to have taken out a successful expedition to the Ganges in order to get a stone for carving out a Pattini image. The poet Ilango adihal is his younger brother, who had entered the holy orders. Senkuttuvan was a great warrior, and had a naval force.

Seraman Perumal, one of the 63 Saiva saints and comrade of St. Sundara (c. 700 A.D.) was a Sera prince. His three songs form part of the Saiva Canon. Kulasekhara alvar (8th century) is a colourful figure of the same royal dynasty whose songs form part of the Vaishnava Canon, First Thousand.

The Nambudiris who had migrated to the Sera country from the north occupied important positions in the state and they are supposed to have directed the succession to the throne. As against



the general rule in the rest of India where the line of succession passed through the male, here in Kerala it had been on the female line, a matriarchal succession.

Sthanuravi was said to be the last ruler in the 9th century. Copper plate grants show that he had made vast concessions to the Christian traders. Bhaskara Varma of the 10th century made many similar concessions to the Jews and colonised them in Cochin. Today Kerala is the only area in India which has a Jewish pocket.

Ravi Varma Kulasekharan in the 13-14 centuries was a capable monarch who had made raids in the neighbouring Chola and Pandiya territories. His reverence for the Nambudiri is manifest in his introduction of the Nambudiris as *archakas* in the Siva temples in such distant places as Ramesvaram in the south and Tiru Otriyur (near Madras) in the north.

The period was one of great political upheaval. One Sri Rama Varma (12th century) wrote the *Kamba Ramayana Yuddha Kandam* alone as a great war epic to enthuse his people in the war efforts. It is in 1815 quatrains, all in the *antadi* arrangement and Sri Rama says that he is writing here his *Rama Charitam* in the Tamil language. It is now hailed as the first work of the Malayalam language. But excepting a few verbal inflexions the whole composition is modern Tamil.

Unlike the Chola and the Pandiya dynasties, the Sera dynasty is considered to have continued even into the 20th century, when the axe of Sardar Patel fell on the system of native rulers and abolished it altogether.

The rulers of Kerala used to be known by their native star. Swati Tirunal, 1813-46 (the prince born on the day when the star *swati* was on the ascendent) was a great musical composer and patron of musicians. His name was Kulasekhara but he was always referred to as Swati Tirunal Maharaja. Most of his compositions are in Sanskrit but some are in other languages like Tamil and Hindustani.

Padmanabha Swami, the form of Lord Vishnu in the Trivandrum temple was the patron deity of this royal house.

Ravi Varma (1848-1906) is a name famous all over Tamilnad. Who does not have his Sarasvati and Lakshmi on his walls? He was descended from a royal family of Kerala and chose art as his profession in life. All his portrayals are scenes from the Puranas. They are actually realistic portrayals of contemporary women rather than any idealised presentation of any deity or Puranic figure.



## THE PALLAVAS

The Pallavas are not known in the Sangham period (upto 250 A.D.) but they had become a powerful dynasty ruling from Kanchipuram upto the end of the 9th century extending their patronage to all arts and letters, Sanskrit and Tamil. The origin of the Pallavas has baffled historians who fight shy of the quite plausible legend given in Manimekhalai that the dynasty was founded by a prince born to the Chola king through the Naga princess Pilivalai. The infant prince who was lost in the seas was wrapped in the tender shoots of the creeper, Tondai, which gave its name to the Pallava nad as Tondai mandalam; tondai was their floral emblem. Pallavam in Sanskrit means tender shoot and this became the name of the dynasty.

Simhavisnu ruled at Kanchi by the end of the 6th century and the great Sanskrit poet Bharavi adorned his court. His son was Mahendra varma (590-630). Mamallapuram (modern Mahabalipuram) was a great seaport of the day. This great ruler first conceived the idea of scooping out caves and rocks leaving behind fine architectural temples. Over a dozen such temples all over the Tamil country sing his glory today. He was a great scholar in Sanskrit and Matta Vilasa Prahasanam, a farce in ridicule of bogus Kapalikas, is his work. He was a great Jain first and St. Appar reclaimed him into the Saiva fold. The Chalukyas under Pulakesin II were a great menace in his reign and the country never recovered from their depredations.

Narasimha (630-668) succeeded him and in the Vatapi battle of 642 A.D. defeated Pulakesin and sacked his city. The Pallava kingdom was at the peak of its grandeur in his day. He helped Manavarma of Sri Lanka to regain his throne from a usurper. In his days Hieun Tsang visited Kanchipuram and has left a record of the glory of the city. Narasimhan continued the glorious temple work of his father and many temples testify to it. But the monoliths at Mahabalipuram done in his day and in the days of his grandson Rajasimha are the greatest monuments in this field.

Paramesvara Varma (670-85) was the next important ruler. He had also contributed to Mahabalipuram. He was a devout Sivabhakta. He is the author of Kshetra tiruvenba in 22 verses found in the 11th Book of the Saiva Canon. He carried on his head a crown shaped like a Sivalinga. Towards the end, he crowned his son Rajasimha and going on a pilgrimage, disappeared.

Rajasimha (686-705) was a contemporary of St. Sundarar of

the Saiva canon and mentioned by him as Kalal-singan, one of the 63 Saints. He developed the Mahabalipuram monoliths and completed the unfinished ones. He calls himself an Agama priya and a great Saiva Siddhantin. His greatest work is the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchi, a structural temple, but unfortunately built of inferior rock and so it has vastly deteriorated through the ravages of wind and rain. He was also good at instrumental music. It was he who was told in a dream that Siva desired to go to the consecration of the mental temple of Pusalar and so wanted him to postpone his consecration. This is recorded in his inscriptions.

Vikramaditya, the Chalukya ruler, planning to wreak his vengeance on the Pallavas for the defeat of his ancestor Pulakesi, marched on Kanchi with a huge army intent upon destroying the city. The Pallava emperor Rajasimha had fled. When Vikramaditya entered the city, he saw the Kailasanathar temple and captivated by its architectural beauty he declared, "I shall not destroy this city which possesses such a beautiful work of art" and returned. His queen Rangapataka was so enamoured of the architecture that she took the architects from Kanchi and caused a replica of this temple to be built by them at Pattadakal.

Dandi, the great Sanskrit rhetorician who wrote Kavya darsam, was the court poet of Rajasimha.

Dantivarma is the first important ruler (775-825) in the next line of the Pallavas. He was also a Vaishnava. Tirumangai alvar lived in his day and mentioned him in his song. His son Nandi varman III (825-850) was a great Siva bhakta. He had made endowments at Tiru Vallam for the oduvar who recited the Devaram songs during the puja occasions. This kind of endowment became a regular feature under the Cholas who had made it their policy to cause the hymns to be sung in the temples.

He was a patron of Tamil poetry and two great poems stand to his credit. One Perundevanar wrote a Bharatam (a campu-kavya in prose and verse) in the venba metre where he praises his Tellaru victory.

The other book is Nandi-kalambakam, a new type of prabandham in that period praising the exploits and munificence of Nandi in the usual 100 verses. Many of his battles are mentioned here and a poignant legend says that on experiencing the great poetic beauty of this poem he gave up his life, not willing to hear anything further. This poem is one of the finest lyrics in the Tamil language.



## THE CHOLAS

The Cholas ruled over the eastern and central regions of Tamilnad for about 430 years uninterrupted, from 846 A.D. when the petty chief Vijayalaya Chola wrested the Tanjavur administration from the Muttarayar, to 1279 when the last ruler, Rajendra III died without an heir. But these are a later dynasty of Cholas. There were crowned monarchs even in the Sangham period with Kaverippattinam (Puhar) and Uraiyur (in Tiruchi town) as their headquarters. Their land was known also as the Ponninadu, because of the great wealth made possible by the irrigation from the the Kaveri called Ponni (pon-gold).

There were many great warriors and poets among the Cholas of the Sangham period. The Cholas ruled the area now represented by the Tanjavur and Tiruchi districts, with the southern areas of South Arcot. They had the tiger on their banner. The bauhinea (aathi) was their floral emblem. The Cholas called themselves descendants of the Surya kula. Puhar itself was a seaport, besides Nagappattinam. Puhar was washed away by the sea perhaps in the later 5th century but the other port continues. The Chola country is known in history as the granary of South India. This was possible because successive rulers from the Sangham age had laid out branches for the Kaveri waters and organised irrigation systems, benefiting their entire kingdom. The Kaveri irrigation system is still a wonder to the entire world which has seen no equal to it. The second Karikal Chola constructed the Grand Anicut further down Tiruchi controlling the flood waters of the Kaveri and diverting the excess to the Bay of Bengal along the broad branch, Kollidam. Built on insecure foundations on the river bed two thousand years ago, the Grand Anicut continues to discharge its function even today and it is considered a marvel of engineering. He is credited with constructing the banks for the broad river.

The ancient Cholas had trade relations with Greece and Rome. Sangham poetry gives us details about many Chola rulers of the period. They had performed Vedic sacrifices.

When a Buddhist branch of the Kalabhras marched on their land and captured Puhar, they were reduced to the level of petty rulers at Uraiyur. Yet Kocchengat Chola (5th century) was a great king who took prisoner the Sera king. He had built more than 70 temples for Siva on a raised base and also some temples for Vishnu. He is a canonized saint.

All the later Cholas were Siva worshippers and many had



gold plated the roof of the Nataraja Hall at Chidambaram. They were the greatest temple builders in all history. The great temples at Tanjavur, Gangai konda solapuram, Darasuram and Tirubhuvanam were built afresh by them. Rajaraja began with Tanjavur and the tradition spread. Women of the royal household vied with one another in building and endowing temples. The Chola style is a great name in the history of architecture.

Gandaraditta one of the Chola monarchs was a saintly soul and his one song of 10 verses on Nataraja is part of the 9th Book of the Saiva canon. Many of the Cholas had annexed Lanka to their territory and spread their religion, temples and culture to that island. They had a large fleet with which they colonised Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and other areas. Theirs was not a mere political conquest but a cultural expansion. Their flag flew over all areas where Tamilians lived and their mission was one of culture – religion, poetry, music and the joy of life.

Rajendra I (1012-1044) marched upto the Ganges and brought the Ganga waters to consecrate his newly built temple and tank at Gangai konda solapuram. This very name expresses his northern expedition. With Kulottunga I (1070-1118) the line passes on through the female line. This King conquered the Kalingas and there was a happy relationship with the Eastern Chalukya kings. Towards the 13th century, the Cholas became weak, the Pandiyas and the Hoysalas became powerful and the dynasty expired when Rajendra III died in 1279 without an heir.

The Chola rule was the most glorious rule Tamilnad had ever seen. Literally milk and honey flowed through the land. All the rulers deemed themselves trustees for God and lavished their wealth on temples. Architecture and sculpture, music, dance and painting were at the height of their glory in Tamilnad. The songs of Appar, Sambandhar and Sundarar were discovered and arranged at the request of Rajaraja I (985-1014) by Nambiyandar Nambi. It has to be remembered that the compilation of the Vaishnava canon was also done at the opening years of this dynasty.

The Chola rule is most important in Tamil history for the hundreds of Siva temples built by the rulers in stone. They had also caused the erection of many Vishnu temples, Buddhist viharas and Jain pallis. The temple rituals were now newly oriented on agamic lines. Songsters were appointed in temples to sing the hymns. Many schools and hospitals were opened.

More important, there was systematic, organised unitary administration in the land. Voting system had been introduced.

## THE NAYAKS

The Nayaks in Tamilnad were local chieftains appointed by the emperors of Vijayanagar and their rule lasted in Madurai, Tanjavur and Tiruchirappalli for over 200 years. Visvanatha Nayak (1529-64) who won the esteem of Krishna devaraya founded the Nayak rule in Madurai on the death of the Raya and this 'dynasty' continued with varying fortunes till 1736. When Vijayanagar fell in 1565, the Madurai Nayaks became independent rulers in South India. Their mother tongue was Telugu and they were responsible for the introduction of the Yakshagana in the Tamil language where it took the shape of Kuram and Kuravanji natakam.

The most celebrated name in this line of Nayaks is Tirumalai Nayak. Virappa Nayak II (1609-23) had transferred his headquarters to Tiruchirappalli but his brother Tirumalai Nayak (1623-59) came back to Madurai (in 1635) out of his devotion to Sundaresa. He was a great administrator and patron of the arts, particularly the structural art of Architecture. When the Vijayanagar raya claimed tribute from Tirumalai, he induced the Sultan of Golkonda and prepared to attack Vijayanagar. This enraged the Mysore Raja who attacked Madurai but Tirumalai was saved by the timely help of the Setupati. He was responsible for giving shelter to the Portuguese and then the Dutch in his territory. The Dutch with the help of their army from Batavia plundered the coast, and carried away Muruha from Tiruchendur. However the image was later recovered from the sea (1654) by Vadamalaiyappa pillaiyan and re-consecrated there. The Madurai Mission which was founded for the propagation of Christianity in the area was given patronage by Tirumalai who may be held to be responsible for the vast conversions in his day.

Tirumalai Nayak was a great builder. The Mahal in Madurai, Teppakkulam, Pudumandapam and the sculptures there are his creation. The Mahal was much larger and much grander than what we see today. The British envious of its grandeur had pulled down a considerable part of it leaving only a portion.

Tradition says that St. Kumaragurupara composed his didactic poem at the request of Tirumalai and published his Minakshi Ammai Pillai Tamil in his court and that Minakshi pleased with this fine song appeared as the child of the temple priest and honoured the saint by taking a pearl necklace from the shoulders of Tirumalai and placing it on Kumaragurupara.

Tirumalai fortified the city with 72 bastions and arranging the



Madurai kingdom into 72 principalities, had ordered each chief to be in charge of one bastion.

His grandson, Sokkanatha (1659-82) transferred his head quarters back to Tiruchirappalli and captured Tanjavur but the Mahratta chief Venkaji seized it from him in 1675 and established there the Mahratta rule.

Rani Mangammal took over as Regent for her grandson, Vijayaranga Chokkanatha, in 1689 and she ruled the land till 1706 when he took over. Her name is a magic name dear to all in Tamilnad history. She was quite a capable administrator and her regency was as beneficial as Tirumalai nayak's. She made a weak and disintegrating kingdom strong and united, through her diplomatic submission to the Sultanate. She was able to subdue Travancore which had once been suppressed by Tirumalai Nayak himself. Her name was proverbial for her munificence. She had made large grants to temples and public charity. She had laid out long roads shaded by trees and they are known by her name even today. Along the roads she had established choultries or rest-houses for the pilgrims, with supplies of water.

She extended her patronage to Christian and Muslim institutions and Christianity grew at a great pace. Had Tirumalai and Mangammal, and Serfoji of Tanjavur at a later period been simple Hindu administrators without active support to the alien religions, the history of conversions would have been vastly different.

Vijayaranga was a weak ruler and after his death in 1732, his widow Minakshi ruled for a short period. It was also a weak rule easily run over by Chanda Sahib and she killed herself in captivity ending Nayak rule at Madurai.

A separate Nayak rule had been established at Tanjavur by Sevappa Nayak, a relative of Achutaraya of Vijaya nagar which lasted for about 135 years from 1540 to 1675. He was the patron of Sivagra yogi, the Saiva acharya of the period and was himself the protege of the great administrator Govinda Dikshitar. The Tanjavur Nayaks, though great Hindu bhaktas, had yet patronized other religions. Raghunatha Nayak (1614-39) was the most important and colourful figure of these Nayaks. All his rule was spent in wars. But yet he found time to build the fine Ramaswami temple at Kumbhakonam and the Kumbhesvarar gopuram there. He had made many endowments to Siva and Vishnu temples. He had written poetical works in Sanskrit and Telugu. He had extended patronage to many composers and poets. Some time after him the rule passed into the hands of the Mahrattas.



## SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is an island, situated at about 20 miles from a southern point of peninsular India, with an area of about 350 thousand square miles and a population of ten millions, most of whom are of a Sinhalese extraction and are Buddhists. The land had been known in Sanskrit as Simhala and later as Lanka, then, ceylon and now, Sri Lanka. One fifth of the people speak Tamil.

The centre of the island is a high plateau with a cultivated coastal belt. Anuradhapuram was the ancient capital, now in ruins. The modern capital is Colombo, and Jaffna, Galle and Kandy are the other main cities.

The language of the people other than Tamil is Sinhalese and this bears a close affinity to Sanskrit because of early Aryan admixture. The Pallavas and the Cholas of South India had administrative and cultural contacts with Sri Lanka. After the disappearance of the Cholas, the Chinese had great influence in Sri Lanka. But with the entry of the Portuguese into the island as traders in 1517, the land experienced continued spells of tyranny and conversion to Christianity. The Dutch entered the island in 1609 and acquired complete control. It came under the British in 1796 and was administered as a crown colony till 1948, when it became a sovereign state.

The architecture of ancient Sri Lanka has a distinctive feature of its own. When Asoka sent missionaries to this island, they brought with them Buddhist religion and many structural arts. The ruins of Anuradhapura and Polannaruva contain the greatest specimens of Sri Lankan art. The Cholas introduced their arts into Sri Lanka which absorbed the South Indian style also.

Sigiria displays the best of the painting arts of the land of the 5th century A.D. The epigraphical records begin from the 3rd century B.C. and these adopt the Brahmi script. They contain considerable historical information and extend to the 18th century. Most of them are in the Sinhalese language. Sanskrit and Tamil epigraphs are seen round the 10th century A.D.

The Mahavamsa is the most valuable historical literary document of the land which aids South Indian history also.

Many great Tamil poets like Prince Arasakesari had also evolved from the land. St. Tiru Jnanasambandar has sung hymns on two of the Siva shrines there, one of which has been celebrated by St. Sundarar also. The Hindus mostly follow Saivism and are devout worshippers of Muruga in the shrine of Katirgammam.

## SECTION 2

# RELIGION



## THE VEDAS

The Vedas are held to be the source books for the culture of the Aryans. They are direct revelations from God embodying the Supreme Truth that cannot be gained by the human mind alone. Veda means God knowledge or God science. The original Veda taught by God fell into obscurity and later, Vyasa (classifier) collected them and classified them. They are understood as four *Rig veda* is the first (in mantra form), *Yajur veda*, *Sama veda* and *Atharva veda*. Each veda has four divisions – the *Samhita* or *Mantra*, the *Brahmana*, the *Aranyaka* and the *Upanishad*. The *Mantra* part is in verse, the *Brahmana* is in prose, and the *Upanishad* in verse and prose. Only some parts of the Vedas are available today, the others having been lost.

The *Mantra* and the *Brahmana* are designated the *Karma kanda*, the parts relating to rituals; the *Aranyaka* as the *Upasana kanda*, the part relating to meditation; and the *Upanishad* as the *Jnana kanda* or the part dealing with Supreme Knowledge.

The Yajur veda is available in two aspects. The *Sukla* (white) *yajur veda* and the *Krishna* (black) *yajur veda*. Correspondingly the *Samhitas* are five *Rig-veda samhita*, *Vajasaneyi samhita* (*Sukla yajur veda*), *Taittiriya samhita* (*Krishna yajur veda*), *Sama veda samhita* and *Atharva veda samhita*. These are all in the form of hymns (mantras) addressed in prayer to various gods.

The Brahmanas contain detailed description of the *yajnas* (ritualistic sacrifices) and their performance. Each veda has one or more brahmanas. The Rig Veda has two, *Sukla yajur veda* one, *Krishna yajur veda* one (the important *Satapada brahmana*), *Sama veda* six and the *Atharva veda* one.

Most of the Aranyakas had been lost. Only the *Taittiriya Aranyaka* of the *Krishna yajur veda* is available.

The Upanishads which deal with philosophy are considered to be just chapters of the Aranyakas. They have survived the ravages of time and there are now 250 upanishads, not all of them early or authentic, or even valuable.

The Rig veda is the most ancient of all Indian writing. The Yajur and Sama vedas contain Rig mantras with slight alterations. The Atharva veda is of an inferior order being concerned also with black magic, and omitting it, the Vedas are generally counted as three.

The main purpose of the *karma kanda* and the *upasana kanda* of the vedas is the attainment of the material gains in this life. The

sacrificial rites are intended to propitiate various gods towards this purpose. But the *jñana kanda* part is intended to secure the realisation of Supreme Knowledge and the attainment of spiritual beatitude.

Nature in all its splendour captivated the mind and imagination of the early Aryans and they deified the multifarious aspects of nature and sang their songs on them, praying for bounties. Thus came into existence all the Vedic gods. *Aditi* (the indivisible) became the mother of all the gods. *Savita* (Surya) is the god of the celestial spheres. *Indra* or *Vayu* (air) is the god of the intermediate space. *Agni* is the god of the lower or terrestrial region. These three first deities in course of time evolved the 33 deities familiar in Sanskrit and Tamil lore. *Mitra* and *Varuna* became the gods of light and night. *Savitr* is the sun god and his familiar *gayatri* mantra sublimates the concepts into a transcendental principle. It is both the heavenly light and the light of intelligence in man.

Since the beginning of the Vedas is not known and since they are not the composition of any human mind, they are held to be eternal and impersonal. The Vedas had been handed down to us only through oral transmission and so were called *srutis*; they were reduced to writing at a very late stage. The correctness of the early text had been kept intact without any deviation by the manner of the *paatha* (or recitation) and this is of five modes; *samhita* – continuous recitation; *pada* – word recitation; *karma* – step; *jataa* – woven recitation; and lastly, *ghana paatha* – compact recitation.

Many modern scholars have attempted to prove that the Rig veda is not mere mantra or *samhita* but contains the beginnings of philosophic speculation, later elaborated in the Upanishads. However, the sacrificial system of the Brahmanas had not been held to have any relevance in the view point of philosophy. Some writers have expressed the opinion that the worship of several forms of *Purusha* in the vedic sacrifices was in a sense an approximation to the *Ekatmavada* philosophy of a much later day. The altar construction was Saivite in character and the sacrifice ritual proper was the origin of the Bhagavata faith called *Pancharatra*. But all these are individual opinions and the general view is that the Vedas did not contain the beginnings of any philosophy. Yet the fact remains that Vedic mythology has interwoven into its fabric many naturalistic, mythological, mystical, ritualistic, social and, may be, even historical material and experience.



## THE UPANISHADS

The upanishads are the end parts of the Vedas and so are called *Vedanta* (veda-anta). All Indian *vaidika* philosophies are Vedanta because they derive their doctrines from the Upanishads. The term upanishad literally means "sitting close together and hence it is the Truth taught to the pupil by the Master by keeping him close to him during instruction. They are also *rahasya* (secret) because only qualified aspirants can be given that knowledge, the knowledge of God and of the meaning of existence. It is the revelation of God and is considered eternal.

Each Veda has a number of upanishads under it and their distribution is as shown here. Rig Veda - 10; Sukla yajur Veda-19; Krishna yajur veda-32; Sama veda - 16; Atharva Veda - 31; making a total of 108 upanishads. Their names are listed in *Muktikopanishad* and all of them are available in print. Of these 10 (some times 12) upanishads are held to be most valuable, since Sankara had written a commentary on them. They are Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukhya, Taittiriya, Aitaraya, Chandogya, Brahadaranyaka, (Nrsimhatapini and Svetasvatara). *Svetasvatara* upanishad mentions a sectarian title for Brahman and so the Ekatmavadin would go so far as to say that the commentary on this upanishad is not Sankara's; but this upanishad is important for the Saivas.

The upanishads are the first of the *Prasthaana traya* (or the Three Basic Texts) of Hinduism (the other two being the *Brahma sutra* and the *Bhagavat gita*) and are basic texts for all systems of Indian philosophy. Philosophies differ according to the interpretation their acharyas place on the texts. This has landed every one in difficulties. When the monist tries to interpret all the texts in his way, he has to torture some passages to make them conform to his view. So also the dualist and qualified monist. Sankara's view is pure monism; the Saiva and the Vaishnava stand is qualified monism, while the Madhya view is dualism. No one school can interpret all the texts in its own way without doing violence to the texts.

The upanishads were not revealed or evolved in a day. They have taken shape over different periods through the experience of different seers. Hence all the thoughts are not identical and need not be so.

The 108 upanishads have been arranged in different groups as *Vedanta* upanishads, the *Yoga* upanishads, the *Sannyasa* upanishads

the *Saiva* upanishads, the *Vaishnava* upanishads, the *Saktha* upanishads etc. But the first 12 commented upon by Sankara are held to be *Vedanta* upanishads and supreme among the 108.

Brahman is the Supreme expounded in all the Upanishads. It is both personal, *saguna* and impersonal, *nirguna*. In the personal aspect, it is God of all religions. He is *Isa*, as in the *Isavasyopanishad* which declares *Isaavaasyam idam sarvam* – in all these He resides.

He is the cause of all. the Lord of all, the Omniscient ruler, the Omnipresent indweller. From Him all things evolved and in Him they merge. The *Kena upanishad* has a fine story to illustrate that He is the cause of all and nothing can function without Him. It introduces the concept of *Uma*, daughter of Himavan, *Siva's Grace* Who confers knowledge on all. But in His impersonal aspect, He has no attributes. He is the Absolute, *Sat Chit Ananda*, Existence, Knowledge and Bliss. These are His very essence. The *Brahadaranyaka* upanishad declares He is not this, not this, etc. The upanishad philosophy declares that the individual soul is identical with this impersonal God.

*Kathopanishad* is the story of Nachiketas who went to Yama, the god of death, and learnt from him the eternal truths regarding life and death. The *Taittiriya* upanishad is among other things a kind of convocation address by the Rishi to the students who graduate out of the *Gurukulam*. It contains some of the most valuable concepts of the upanishadic thought that are relevant even today in the outside world. It emphasizes the value of food and the great duty of venerating the parents and the preceptor.

The *Mandukya Upanishad* contains the famous line which describes the Brahman as *adrshitam*, *avyavaharyam*, *agrahyam*, *avyapadesyam*, *ekatma pratyaya saram*, *prapanchopasamam*, *santam*, *sivam*, *chaturtham*, *manyante sa atma sa vigneayah*. It is unseen, unrelated, inconceivable, uninferable, unimaginable, indescribable. It is the essence of the one self-cognition common to all states of consciousness. All phenomena cease in it. It is peace, It is bliss, It is non-duality. This is the Self and this is to be realised. The terms *advaitam* and *Sivam* occurring here are significant.

The oft quoted thoughts, 'like the razor's edge', 'like the rivers all flowing into the sea', 'Satyameva jayate' are taken from the *Mundakopanishad*. *Chhandogya* and *Brhad aranyaka* are two of the larger upanishads.

The *Svetasvatara*, also an ancient and authoritative text, is valuable for the system of *Saiva Siddhanta* philosophy.



## THE SAIVAGAMAS

The Saiva Agamas are some of the earliest books in the Sanskrit language on the Saiva religion and philosophy, written over a period of several centuries before the Christian era. They represent an independent class of writing by very early seers, who had an inward experience and enlightenment from the Supreme Being, and who were also perhaps influenced by the Vedas in their original form. Just as the Vedas are said to have originated from the *four faces of Brahma*, the Agamas are said to have originated from the *five faces of Paramesvara*. This in no way affects the statement that they were written by early seers. The Divine revelation was made to the seers who put them down in writing after a long period of oral transmission.

The Theism of the South or rather, the Saivism of the Tamilians, was the growth of an unbroken tradition, probably from a pre-historic past, and this had three elements fused into it. These are worship of idols and images both in the shrines throughout the land and in the devotees' own homes, symbolism, and an inward meditation and realisation.

When the Upanishads were added on to the Vedas in the course of the later centuries, they could not but be influenced by the religion and philosophy flourishing around them. These naturally embody a considerable volume of the thought of the Agamaic scholars, because some of the early Agamas were earlier than these later Upanishads, and the Agamas were very much alive and vibrating with life and activity than the Upanishads, because they dealt with definite and concrete objects and were practised in the daily lives of a large number of people, while the others dealt only with abstract concepts within the reach of a few.

Because the Agama emanated from God, it is called the A-gama, that which came from God. Another meaning is that the three letters, *aa-ga-ma* respectively denote *pati*, *pasu* and *paasa* (the Self, the soul and the bonds) and that the Agama deals with all these three entities and their relationship and hence this name.

It is given as *aa*-knowledge, *ga*-liberation and *ma*-removal of the bonds. The Agama came to be called as such, since a study and adherence to its codes liberates the soul from bondage, causes realisation of the Supreme, and ultimately confers eternal bliss.

It has been suggested that the Agamic systems were developed out of the Brahmanas in the same way as the Upanishads, though at a much later stage, and that some of the later Upanishads, like

the *Svetaasvatara*, which addresses the Supreme Being by a sectarian title and not as *Param Brahman*, as of yore, probably grew up under the shadow of the Agamas. The agamas are often called the Veda and the fifth Veda.

Only the Agamic cult had been able gradually to swallow up Buddhism on the Indian sub-continent, and ultimately to banish it altogether from the Indian soil; it was not the Upanishadic philosophy but the Agamic cult that was responsible for the supplanting of Buddhism and for the fusion of its salient features into the core of the Hindu religion.

Both the Vedas and the Agamas are *sruti*, handed down by word of mouth through generations before being reduced to writing; both are considered the revealed word of God.

All schools of Hinduism base their doctrines on the Agamas. The Vedas speak of many gods and the Upanishads speak of one Brahman. The Agamas are no less monistic, and they do call their doctrines *advaita*; instead of abstract monism, they take into consideration the limitations of man and preach mono-theism.

The *Vidyapaada* (called *Jnanapada* in the Tamil sastras) deals with the three entities in Saiva Siddhanta matter, soul and God (technically called *pasa*, *pasu* and *pati*). The *Kriyapada* is the second. It elaborates the several types of *diksha* (or initiation into the worship of Siva), the process of building Siva temples (temple architecture), making Siva-lingas and other idols in stone and bronze (sculpture), the daily and periodical occasions for worship and festivals, which range from choosing the site and preparing it for temple construction, to forms of worship and festivals and expiatory, purificatory and renovating rituals.

The third is the *Yogapada*, dealing with the eight steps for yoga. The *Charya pada* which is the fourth deals with human conduct and collection of materials for worship.

Each Agama has a number of subsidiary Agamas called *Upagamas* and their total number is 207. Among the Upagamas the *Paushkara* and the *Mrigendra* are well known.

The *Kriyapada* of the *Kamika* agama is well-known.

The Agamas have been the bedrock of the higher culture of India – its temples and festivals, its architecture and sculpture, its music and dance. All art had been dedicated in the past to God, thanks to the Agama influence and as people were temple-minded, the temples had survived the various vicissitudes of political turmoils and religious persecution.



## THE PURANAS

*Purana* means an old story. Th collection of time-honoured legends connected with the exploits of the various deities and the conferment of grace on persons who worshipped and made an absolute surrender to that deity go by the name of *Purana*. As society developed and new townships grew, housing therein new shrines for Siva, Vishnu and other deities, legends also grew giving accounts of the devotees to God who worshipped there and had experienced in their lives the Mercy of God. Such legends were later composed in verse and they are known as *sthala puranas*. The Mahapuranas are 18 in number, of which 10 are in praise of Siva, 4 in praise of Vishnu, 2 of Brahma and one each in praise of Surya and Agni. All the Sanskrit puranas had been printed. It is usual to attribute the authorship of all the puranas to Sage Vyasa. But the word Vyasa means only a compiler; the compilers of the different puranas in different ages in the different parts of the country happened to be known by the common name Vyasa. All the writing is not one man's composition.

The *Bhagavata purana* states that only those born on the banks of the Tamraparni, Vaihais, Palaru, the greatly meritorious Kaveri and Mahanadi, and nourished on their waters, could have the greatest *bhakti* and surrender; it is obvious that this great and important purana was written (in Sanskrit) in the Tamil country.

During the centuries from the 16th some of the Mahapuranas had been adapted in full in Tamil verse form as large volumes; in the recent period some had been translated into prose. The large *Skanda purana* and the *Bhagavata purana* in Tamil had been done in epic form. The *Upa-puranas* (subsidiaries to the Mahapuranas) and the *Atipuranas* are each said to be 18 but not all of them are available either in manuscript or in print.

Sthala puranas glorifying Siva or Vishnu enshrined in temples are available in hundreds. Though all of them cannot lay claim to high poetry, *Tiru vilayadal purana* by Paramjoti munivar is a remarkable large work of good poetic excellence.

The characteristics for a maha purana had been laid down as five—the creation of the universe, its dissolution, the dynasties that ruled the land, the sages and their life stories. Many other subjects have been included in these groups such as the virtues of shrines and their tanks, the *avatars* of Vishnu and their exploits, the *dharma* of the different *varnas*, *vratas*, praise of deities, some cases of mantras, actual puja rituals etc.

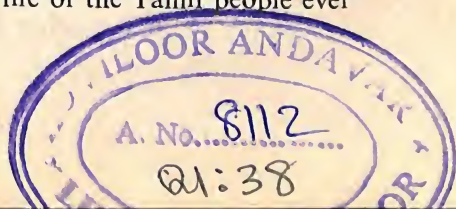
The Sage Suta is invariably the narrator of the puranic stories to the large number of rishis (sages) who are assembled in the Naimisaranya forest for purposes of penance. It has to be recalled that Suta is of low class birth while most of the rishis are of high class brahmin birth.

The section on cosmology found in all the major puranas is a very interesting feature. The solar system, other similar systems, the three worlds, the seven seas and the seven continents, the seven hills etc, are all given an elaborate and detailed description, which is almost uniform in all the puranas. Other aspects dealt with are the human body and astrology. Philosophy and devotional verses are found in most. A form of poetry called *kavaca* is found in some puranas in honour of Vinayaka, Siva, Sakti, Narayana, Lakshmi and so on. The intention seems to be to invoke the deity through his or her various names and place him or her on the various parts of the body to protect that part. In the result the worshipper creates a kind of mantra armour to give him protection at all times.

Biographical puranas form an important and large section of the puranas. The earliest was *Periyapuranam* by St. Sekkilar wherein he narrates the 63 life stories of the Saiva *nayanmar* or men of God in fine epic poetic form. He was followed by St. Kadavul mamunivar who has written the metrical biography of St. Manikkavacakar in a short compass. The author here carries on the narration with the only keynote of bhakti where there is no mention of woman at all. Similar biographical puranas have been many in the later centuries in Saivism and Vaishnavism.

The puranas had a great function and purpose in the period in which they were evolved. There was great gloom and despair through the Muslim impact, desecration and conversion. At such moments of total despondency, the puranas written in poetic form directed the people along the path of a chosen deity and were able to infuse confidence and solace, courage and hope, and stirred them to action. They gave the people great hold in their own religion when faced with conversion at the point of the sword, and enabled them to meet challenges boldly. Besides, they kept up the continuity of the literary tradition but for which no Tayumanavar or Ramalingar could have evolved in a later day.

Besides being great literature, the four puranas, *Periya puranam*, *Kandapuranam*, *Vadavuradihal puranam* and *Tiruvilayadal puranam* had been inspiring and moulding the life of the Tamil people ever since they were written.





## SAIVISM

Saivism is one of the oldest religions of the world and is still a living religion. It took shape when the culture and civilization of man took shape: its origins have been pre-historic. Saivism is a concept of culture as understood in India in the past. It is a way of life.

*Sat-Chit-Ananda* is said to be the definition of God in Saivism. It is Truth, Knowledge and Bliss-Life, Light and Love. We know in the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi considered Truth as God and emphasized through all his speeches and writings, and his very living, that Truth and Love are just like the two faces of a coin and that God is the coin. His life is a luminous example to show that it is really possible to translate this highest philosophy into a way of living. Saivism indicates that way of living.

The term *Sivam* is a vedic term and it means that which confers happiness. *Sivam* may be taken to have signified a state of perfect goodness and happiness for which everyone has to strive. That has been personified as the Supreme Reality, *Siva*, and those who strive to attain it had been called the *Saivas*.

Saivism is always an open religion; it absorbs all things into its fold; it does not rail at others. The goal is one; it is the same for all; the paths leading to it are many. Saivism has no quarrel with people who follow paths other than its own. "Cows are many coloured; but their milk is all white." "Even when narrow minded persons speak of other religions out of spite, our Lord does not disapprove of them. Still, He is beyond all and every one of them." (St. Appar.) "When one religion asserts this is my religion, this is my philosophy, and this is my Book, and not anything else, then that religion is not any of these."

Saivism is a universal religion and has always been such. It shows the way to all mortals to strive consciously for liberation from bonds and for attaining *moksha*. It teaches man that he can reach it by purity of action. Here, ends and means have to be pure. It has devised different ways of seeking God, to suit the different moulds in which human beings are cast. Man may worship God in any form and *Siva's* Grace is bestowed on him through that form. External things do not matter much, if the seeking heart is earnest and pure. Its universality is based on its general tolerance and the firm conviction that God is one and He dwells in all.

Again, as in the other branches of Hinduism, Saivism does

not differentiate between man and woman in the matter of spiritual progress. Woman has as much right as man in the realm of the spirit, which recognises no sex difference.

The highest concept of all philosophy is that God is Love. In Saivism, not only God, but even a godly man, a Saiva, means Love. One who aspires to reach Him, should also overflow with love. Love, when associated with God, is termed Grace. *Kural* asks: "How can he feel any pity, who eats another's flesh [to fatten his own flesh?]" Two thoughts in this verse are noteworthy. One is that for the sense of pity, it employs the word *arul*, grace; the second is that when referring to flesh, it does not distinguish between man's flesh and the flesh of an animal: the implication is that all creation is one. Here ethics or personal conduct has been raised to the highest level of philosophy.

The lives of the Saiva Saints tell us that the worshippers of Siva have hailed from all sects of the community. The Saiva religion did not set much store by caste.

Saiva religion has always directed its efforts at a synthesis of all mankind, at social unity, amidst all the prevalent classes and creeds. The stories of the canonized saints will illustrate this truth. The Buddhist born Sakkiya is reckoned a Saiva saint; not only that; when Sundara sang that he was the 'servant of the worshippers beyond' he extended the Saiva fold in space as well as in time, crossing all caste barriers and creeds, climes and languages. Man had freedom to worship; but there should be love at heart; sweetness in words; righteousness in action, and humility in conduct.

This idea is best summarised by Tirumular: "Any one can offer a bit of a leaf to God (in the place of a flower when a flower cannot be had); any one can give a handful of grass to a cow; any one can give a morsel of rice to the needy (out of his own food); and any one can speak a kind word to another." This takes us on to the more liberal view of Saivism. This religion shows reverence to all life, not only to the human life.

Religion sublimated all emotions and spiritualizes them just as poetry itself sublimates experiences and puts them into words to become a beautiful work of art. Saivism equates the Absolute of metaphysics with *satchitananda*, in a sense, Beauty and Bliss. Siva is pure and perfect and what is pure and perfect is Beauty even according to wordly standards.



## VAISHNAVISM

Vaishnavism is the religion of the followers of Vishnu. The name Vishnu means the Indweller in all. There are two aspects to Vishnu: one as one of the Tirimurti, Vishnu the protector and the preserver; two as the Supreme, the Absolute of metaphysics called Narayana and Paravasudeva. This religion holds Vishnu as the Supreme Being, the Brahman. Vishnu is Tirumal (meaning the Holy Great One) for over 2500 years in the Tamil literary convention.

People claim that Vishnu finds mention in the Vedas. But that is not relevant to the distinct cult of Vaishnavism, perhaps originated by the Twelve Alvar in the 6th to the 9th centuries but codified by Ramanuja (1017-1137) as a separate religion with its own rituals, modes of worship, philosophy and philosophical exposition. The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata glorify the *avatars* (incarnations) of Vishnu but they contain nothing about Vaishnavism as a cult. The doctrine of *prapatti* or total self-surrender is said to be the special contribution of the Alvar expounded in their highly emotional songs.

But the Agamas for Vaishnavism are said to be far earlier than the Alvar and they are all in Sanskrit. Their agamas, called *Samhitas* are said to be over 200, of which nine are considered most important. The earlier school of Vaishnavism is said to be the *Vaikanasa* school, propounded by sage Vikanasa which could not be followed by those who are not by birth the followers of the *Vikanasa sutra*. Before the advent of Ramanuja, Vaikanasam was the ruling creed of the religion in the entire country and all the temples followed the Vaikanasa agamas in all temple rituals beginning from *karshana* to *samprokshanam* (consecration).

Ramanuja introduced his reformed system of Vaishnavism known as the *Pancharatra* system which was not as rigorous as the earlier school. The Vaikanasa dharma could not be transmitted to anyone outside the rigid birth group but *Pancharatra* could be transmitted to any one, as in fact Ramanuja had done.

In the Vaikanasa school, God is Bhagavan and His Sakti is Sree. Japa, homa, archana and yaga are the means to attain Him. It is not concerned with *yantra*, *nyasa* and *mudra* which are important for the other. Only male members are eligible for worship in Vaikhanasam.

Pancharatra derives its name from the five-fold divisions of the day (ratra): going to the shrine (*abhigamana*), collecting materials

for worship (*upadana*), *ijya* (act of worship), study of the sacred texts (*svadhyaya*) and *yoga* (meditation). All members (including women) are eligible for worship here. *Pancharata* is also said to be the spiritual knowledge imparted in five nights.

Vishnu is conceived of in five forms-*Para* the supreme; *Vyuha*-His different forms as Vasudeva, Samkarshana, Pratyumna and Aniruddha; *Vibhava* - avatars such as Rama and Krishna; *Antaryami*- the indweller in each soul or individual; and *Archa* — the manifest image in the Vishnu temples. *Bhakti* is devotion or love that is natural to pious souls, but a higher step is *prapatti* or absolute surrender.

The Omnipresent God is both immanent and transcendent. He is the indwelling controller of all things and all beings. The selves are real (as against the concept of illusion in Sankara's *dvaita*). Devotion and surrender will redeem man and this redemption is achieved through the Grace of God. God's Grace is free and spontaneous but it cannot be compelled. The path of devotion and surrender is open to all irrespective of class, caste or sex. Worship may be offered to the *archa* in the temple through the priest there, to the image in the home, and to the Lord in the heart.

The preceptor or *acharya* holds a unique place of honour in this religion and He is to be revered as God Himself. Next to the *acharya*, the *bhagavatas* (men of God) are to be revered and some times they are even placed above God Himself. This naturally means the extolling of the company of the men of God and this sense of social service is held to be equivalent to the service of God. The wearing of the Vishnu mark (*tirumann*), and of the *mudras* on the shoulders, and the leaves of the basil plant are most valuable. Chanting of the Lord's name is also most efficacious in warding off undesirable thoughts and in fixing the mind on Him.

By about two centuries after Ramanuja, his cult of Vaishnavism split into two sects which, though owing all allegiance to Vishnu and Ramanuja, have carried their minor differences in doctrines to vexatious lengths. The Alvar songs are the *Dravida Veda* for both the sects. The *Acharya* for *Vadakalai* (northern) is Vedanta Desikar who has written a number of works in Sanskrit and Tamil; Manavalamamunihal is the Chief for the *Tenkalai* (southern). *Vadakalai* considers Sri, the consort of Vishnu, as the Divine aspect of His Grace while *Tenkalai* considers Sri just a *jiva*.



## SAKTAM

Saktam is the religion and philosophy of a cult that holds Sakti as the Supreme Being. The Saivas hold Siva to be the Supreme Godhead and they consider Sakti, the Energy or Consort of Siva, inseparable from Him. They also worship Sakti and always have a separate sub-shrine for Her in all their Siva temples. They consider Sakti to be the personification of the Grace of Siva. The Ardhanarisvara form of Siva is very popular here; it is just a sculptural portrayal of the concept of inseparableness, besides being one of the 25 manifest forms of Siva. Sakti cult holds Her as the Supreme and Siva Himself as a deity subordinate to Her. The Sakti cult had been for ages past the unique cult of Bengal and continues to be so to this day.

In early Tamil temple history, Sakti was installed in the Siva temples within the sanctum of the Siva linga itself. But in the period of the Chola emperors, as the temple cult developed, a separate sub-temple was constructed for Her in the large hall in front of the sanctum facing south and Her stone image was installed there. This became the vogue from the days of Kulottunga Chola II (1133-1150). Sakti is installed here in all the temples, in a standing posture with two arms. A few temples place her in a different position in the temple. Rarely is she given a sitting posture as in Tiru Miyachur (near Peralam). Here she is known as Lalitambikai in whose honour the famous *Lalita Sahasranama* (1000 names of Sakti) was composed. Occasionally she is even provided with four arms. Sakti has always a distinctive name in each shrine. This is generally based on the local legends or in some cases on the names mentioned by the hymnists in their hymns sung on the temple. She is Minakshi in Madurai, Kamakshi in Kanchipuram, Periyannayaki in Tanjavur, Akhilandesvari in Tiru Anaikka and so on. It is well known that she is Visalakshi in Banaras (Kasi). The consort of Nataraja is known as Sivakamasundari in all the temples.

Worship of Sakti had existed in Tamilnad from very ancient times. The first available Tamil work, *Tolkappiyam*, mentions Her as *Kotravai*, the patron deity of the *palai* (desert) region. She is mentioned in the Sangham poems by this name and also spoken of as the daughter of Himavan, as *Suli* (wielder of the trident) and as *Palaiyol* (the ancient Goddess). *Silappadhikaram*, the first Tamil epic, has some fine verses in Her praise. She is here the younger sister of Vishnu. Yet she is praised as the Supreme:

“Holding a sword in your bejewelled hands, You destroyed the Mahishasura, and mounted the deer with the forked horns! You stand as the lustrous lamp shedding its light, and abiding in the lotus hearts of the three-Vishnu, Hara and Brahma.” The general picture here given is reminiscent of a Sakti cult.

*Perumkathai*, a large epic poem (c. 700 A.D.), gives a fine picture of Her temple in the desert region. “Her temple is situated at the side of a hill covered with pebbles sharp like the teeth of a saw-file. A broad wall encloses the temple. The horns of stags and the feathers of peacocks adorn the place. Banners fly on bamboo poles; also hideshields, spears and swords, quivers and bows. Kotravai has a bright face like the moon. Her arms hold eight weapons. A jewelled corset adorns her breasts. She is like the parrot green, with coral lips and pearl-like smile, eyes like the fish and brows curved like the bows; she loves to have the stag as her mount.”

“Ear drops swinging, golden jewels waving,  
Flower locks dancing, swarms of bees flitting –  
Let us bathe in the cool flood, sing on Chitrambalam  
Sing the Lord of the Vedas, their inner import,  
Sing the glory of Light, His *cassia*-wreath  
Sing the Power of Him who is the First and the Last,  
Sing the glory of Her Feet, who wears the armlet  
And who reared us up, separate – O *Empavai*”

is a rare song from St. Manickavacakar’s *Tiru Empavai*.

Tirumular who wrote *Tirumantram* in nine books devotes the fourth book to praise Sakti and the many mystic diagrams associated with Her worship. The siddhar are worshippers of Sakti. They worship Her as *Bala*, a ten year old child, with many esoteric rites.

During the 16th century many poets have sung separate poems on Sakti. Sankarar’s *Soundarya lahari* has been rendered in Tamil metrical form in this period. Many *pillai-Tamil* poems, fondling Her as a child, had been written now.

The *vamachara* cult of Bengal, given to many objectionable practices had never had any following in Tamilnad. The greatest poem on Her was *Abhirami antadi* by Abirami Bhattar (early 18th century). He was accused of this *vamachara* but in fact he was not a follower thereof.

Lakshmi (Consort of Vishnu) and Sarasvati (Consort of Brahma) are the givers of prosperity and knowledge and their worship has been continuous from the early periods.



## THE ITIHASAS

*Itihasas* in Sanskrit are old stories which had come down through many centuries by word of mouth and later written down in verse by a gifted poet. They are the great epics of any nation. In Sanskrit lore, the *Itihasas*, or grand epics, are considered to be three – the *Ramayana*, dealing with the story of Rama, written by Valmiki, the *Mahabharata*, dealing with the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, written by Vyasa, and the *Bhagavata*, the story of Krishna, written by several writers in several books. They are supposed to deal with the *avatars* of Vishnu and his exploits on the human level. There are several such grand epics dealing with the exploits of Siva, but they are all termed *purana*. Epics usually are the exploits of human beings; Rama and Krishna have come down to the human plane and hence their exploits are *itihasa*. But Siva has not come down to the human plane; hence his exploits are not *itihasa*. Only the *Skanda purana*, though termed a *purana*, yet holds a unique place as a grand epic or *itihasa*. The *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavata* and *Kandapurana* may be considered the *Itihasas* for All India.

### RAMAYANA

Valmiki collected the stories of Rama relevant in folklore before his day and wrote them in a large epic poem of 24000 verses, noted to be the *Adikavya* for India. The greatest epic of Tamilnad is Kambar's *Ramayana*, which though modelled on the Sanskrit poem far surpasses it in epic character, style, drama, characterization and even in poetry. It is not a translation but an original work ranking even superior to the greatest books of the world. Many incidents in the story of Rama, unknown to Valmiki or Kambar, are referred in earlier Tamil poetry.

### MAHABHARATA

The Mahabharata deals with the stories of the five Pandavas and the Hundred Kauravas, sons of brothers, the defeat of the former by the latter in unethical ways and the deadly battle in which all but the five were killed. It is a large ocean where we meet all sections of vice and virtue; its very size has not been equalled in any language.

The Mahabharata in Sanskrit is the largest epic poem in all world literature; the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer, the greatest books of the West, are together just a tenth of the Sanskrit epic. The Mahabharata has been associated with the Tamilnad, from the

beginning of Tamil literary history. Translations of the Mahabharata had also been many, under the patronage of the Pandiyas and the Cholas, but they are not available.

Fragment of a Mahabharata written in the court of Nandivarma Pallava III (825-850) is available. It is in prose and verse. The pride of place in *Mahabharatam* goes to the large book of the 14th century, in about 4300 verses by Villiputturar. Out of the eighteen cantos (*parvas*) in the original, he stops with the tenth. His poetry is remarkable for its *chandam* (a mechanical rhythm of the syllables) and partly on this account, this Bharatam has been popular even among the semi-literates. He is good at character portrayal and the characters are all alive and aflame in people's memory. The greatness of Villi is that he was not sectarian. A confirmed Vaishnava himself, he gave due praise to Siva whenever the occasion demanded it.

### BHAGAVATA

The *Bhagavata*, also considered an itihasa, had been rendered into Tamil in poetic form by two writers in the 16th century. These seem to have been written to propagate the Vaishnava bhakti. Incidentally they mention all the stories and legends connected with Vishnu including His other nine incarnations. In this respect, they will continue to serve as encyclopaedias for years to come.

The Krishna cult is a most sensuous one and so has great popularity in North India. Yet some verses in the Sanskrit *Bhagavata purana* state that only those that were reared on the banks of the Tamraparni, Vaihais, Palar, the very holy Kaveri and Mahanadi and drink its waters can have any bhakti in them. This statement is very significant in this that the bhakti cult originated only from the Tamilnad and then spread to the other areas.

### KANDA PURANA

It is the most popular Tamil religious book in all Sri Lanka. *Kanda puranam* by Kachiyappa Sivacharya (14th century) is like *Kamba Ramayanam*, a great epic poem. Its chief importance lies in the fact that it deals elaborately with the story of Skanda in a manner suitable for religious discourses and also that it deals very often with the concepts of the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. The following describes the nature of Skanda as the Supreme Godhead: "He is beyond the perception of the Vedas; He cannot be perceived by the Knowledge, gained from the Upanishads. He is the newest of the new, and the oldest of the old; He is the end of all ends and the beginning of beginning: He, the pure, is the soul's soul."



## RELIGION

Asia has been the cradle of all world religions. Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammed were born in Asia. The Buddha was born in India and his religion and philosophy extended over the entire Far East from Japan and China to Burma and Ceylon. People would say that India had driven out Buddhism from its shores. But this statement is not correct. Buddhism was a reformist movement which sought to bring about some radical reforms in the Hindu religion in which the Buddha was born. The Buddha directed his chief reform against the practice of animal sacrifices in the Vedic *yajnas*. His measures were successful; the Vedic religion, or Hinduism as it is now known, completely discarded animal sacrifice. To that extent Hinduism had absorbed Buddhism and so the latter had no further mission to fulfil on the land in which it was born. Through the great efforts of the Indian rulers, Buddhism was taken to many countries overseas which were not religiously so advanced. Thus the message of the Buddha spread elsewhere:

So far as Tamilnad is concerned, Buddhism had never seized power in any part of the country and so as a way of life, was never disliked by the people. The Tamil people had an ancient religion, be it Saivism or Vaishnavism, where there was no killing of animals. *Karma* and rebirth were accepted doctrines in both the religions. There was strong criticism of the Buddhist faith here because temples and worship could not be relished by true Buddhism,. Yet Tamil literature has very fine Buddhist epic and religious lyric poetry which is a source of delight even to this day.

The position is different in regard to Jainism. It had seized power in the north and the south in Tamilnad and as its way of life was a negation of native Tamil culture, it was disliked and the people helped to put it down. Yet there are some good epics and didactic poetry through Jainism.

An important point to be borne in mind is that the South had been the cradle of all Hindu philosophy and not the North. Sankara and Ramanuja, with Meykandar (from Tamilnad) and Madhva and Basava (from outside Tamilnad) had all been philosophers hailing from the South and today it is their philosophy that is ruling the whole of India.

### SECTION 3

## DEITIES



## GANAPATI

Ganapati (Ganesa) is the leader of Siva's forces. He is also called Vinayaka, He who has no one above Him. Hindus all over the world first worship Ganapati before commencing any work or enterprise. His worship is considered to help in overcoming obstacles; in this aspect, he is called Vignesvara, the remover of obstacles. The religion of the followers of Ganapati is said to be Gaanaapatya but this has never been a separate cult or *mata* in Tamilnad. Some upanishads like the *Ganapati Upanishad* and *Ganesa Puranam* sing His praises. The Tamil *Vinayaka puranam* by Kachiyappa munivar (end of the 18th century) is a large epic type of purana in a few thousand verses extolling His greatness. This also gives a descriptive account of twelve forms of Vinayaka.

There are many stories regarding His origin but they are not relevant here. He has an elephant head, four arms, a large belly and very short legs. He is always the *brahmachari* (bachelor). But he is often pictured with a consort named *Vallabhai* who is merely His energy personified. *Siddhi* (attainments) and *Buddhi* (intellect) are also portrayed as His consorts. He destroyed Gajamukhasura the elephant headed demon whom no other could destroy.

His mount is the shrew, personification of effort and industry. His special day of national worship is the Vinayaka *chaturtti* day, the fourth in the bright fortnight of the month of Avani. According to the puranas he is the elder of the two sons of Siva-Parvati and so is called *Mutta-Pillaiyar*. But in Saiva philosophy He is just one of the manifest forms of the Supreme Siva.

Many legends relate to the exploits of Ganapati. When Sage Agastya was doing a great tapas on the Kavera hill, Ganapati tilted his *kamandala* (water pot) containing the Ganga water, and it flowed down as the River Kaveri to irrigate the flower garden of Indra at Sikali. When Muruha was courting Valli and she would not succumb to His overtures, He appeared as an elephant before her, making her rush out of fright into the arms of Muruha. When Ravana was taking the Sivalinga given to him by Siva in Kailas, for worship in his Lanka, Ganapati received it from him for a moment when he went away to answer nature's call and although enjoined not to place it on the ground, He placed it down and it took root there and could not be removed; thence came the shrine Gokarna. In like manner, he placed down the form of Lord Vishnu given by Rama and taken by Vibhishana to Lanka and it took root there as Lord Ranganatha at Sri Rangam.

His whole form is symbolic. His elephant head is *Pranava*; *ankusa* (goad) and *pasa* (noose) denote His grace and Omnipresence, feet represent *siddhi* and *buddhi*, large ears His Omniscience, His single tusk the Supreme Knowledge, the broken tusk refers to His compassion to mortals, His huge belly denotes His tolerance and is also symbolic of the fact that the entire universe is contained in Him.

At the prayers of Sage Vyasa, He consented to write down the Mahabharata provided Vyasa could dictate unceasingly. Vyasa agreed. The speed of his dictation was such that during the writing, Ganapati's stylus broke; instantly He broke one of his tusks and with the broken piece as a stylus He continued the writing.

There is a legend that He lifted up the poetess, Avvai, and placed her on Kailas. According to the legend she was a friend of Saints Sundarar and Seraman and knowing through her intuition that they were going to Kailas, she hurried with the *puja* she was performing in order to reach Kailas along with them. However, He advised her to do her *puja* without haste; she did so and at the end He lifted her up with his trunk and placed her in Kailas in time for their arrival. She sang a poem on the occasion named *Vinayakar ahaval* (in 72 lines of blank verse) and it is recited today during his *puja* by devotees all over Tamilnad.

There are three poems on Ganesa in the 11th Book of the Saiva Canon. He is the most popular deity in Tamilnad and we find Him installed on platforms anywhere and in all newly formed colonies. Gajamukhasura had compelled all the celestials to knock on their temples with their knuckles and sit and rise holding their ears, a form of humiliating exercise. As prayed by him at the time of his death, this exercise called *toppu-karanam* continues to be performed to please Ganesa now.

Many forms of Ganesa are mentioned in books and many exist in various places. The one at Tiru Valamchuli temple made out of the *erukku* (*caleotropsis*) root is famous. The one at Tiruchengattankudi was brought by the commander of Narasimha varma Pallava (630-668) as a war spoil. The Polla-pillaiyar at Tiru Naraiyur had shown to Nambiyandar Nambi where to locate the *Devaram* hymns (c. 1010 A.D.). St. Meykandar (middle of the 12th century) was a devotee of Pollap-pillaiyar at Tiruvennainallur. Ganapati with a human face can be seen in Chidambaram and Tiruchengattankudi. He is worshipped by Jains and Buddhists. The Ganapati cult can be seen beyond the seas even among other nationals.



## SUBRAHMANYA

The name subrahmanya occurs in Tamil literature only later in the 10th century. He had always been known as Muruha, the Lord of Kurinji (hill tracts) and as Kumara, the Son of Siva, and the ever youthful. Muruha is the symbol of youth and beauty. He is always held as the patron deity of the Tamil people and their language. All hills and hill shrines had been dedicated to Him and there are several temples in every district of Tamilnad dedicated to Him. *Tiru Muruhatruppadai* mentions six places as his camps-Tiruchendur in Tirunelveli, Tiruparankunram, Pazhamudir solai (Alahar koil) and Palani in Madurai, Tiru Eraham (Swamimalai) in Tanjavur and Kunruthoradal (all hills). Katirgamam in Sri Lanka is equally famous as His abodes such as Tirupporur, Seyyur, Kumarakottam of Kanchi, Tiruttani, Sikkil, Tiru Vidaikkali, Enkan, Ettikudi, Vayalur, Viralimalai, Kunrakkudi, Kalugumalai, Tiruchenkodu, Marudamalai and Chennimalai.

Literature on Muruha in Tamil is vast, as vast as on Siva. *Tiru Muruhatruppadai* and *Paripadal* songs are Sangham poetry. *Kandapurānam* in 10345 verses and its abridgement by another poet in 1000 verses speak of His glory and His exploits. The Saiva acharyas all refer to Him in their songs. Saint Arunagirinathar was the greatest Muruha *bhakta* who has captured the hearts of the Tamilians by his *Tiruppuhal* songs on Muruha. There is no other song in Tamil which sways even the unlettered people as his songs. Thousands of devotional songs have been sung on Muruha from the earliest period to the modern day. The legends connected with his exploits, His form and His grace bestowed on devotees through the different periods have tremendously influenced the minds of poets and singers.

His story is a colourful one. The celestials prayed to Siva to rid them of the menace of the demon, Surapadma. Six sparks which emanated from the central eyes on His six foreheads took the form of the six-faced Shanmukha. He tamed the fierce goat that arose in the sacrificial fire of Sage Narada and used it as His mount. When Brahma the creator could not give out the significance of the Pranava, He knocked him on the head and put him behind bars, saying "when you do not know this, how can you perform the function of creation?" At the intervention of Siva, who was satisfied with His exposition of the Pranava, He released Brahma.

With the help of Virabahu and the other warriors created by Sakti out of her anklet, He engaged in a battle with Surapadma. A

spear, the *Jnanasakti*, was given to Him and with it He slew Taraka, brother of Surapadma and destroyed the Krauncha hill. Then He destroyed the lion-faced brother of Sura and clove in two Surapadma himself when he hid himself as a mango tree in the sea. With the benign look of Muruha, the two parts became the peacock and the cock which He took as His mount and as His banner.

Out of gratitude, Indra, the lord of the celestials, gave the hand of his daughter Devasena in marriage to Muruga. Then He wooed and wed Valli in the Valli hills. She was the daughter of Vishnu and Lakshmi when they had assumed the deer form. She had been brought up by the head of a hill tribe there. When Muruha was wooing Valli, Ganesa appeared at a crucial moment when Valli was angry with Muruha and the frightened Valli ran into the arms of Muruha. Then their wedding took place. The wooing and the later wedding is a legend which seems to have arisen to satisfy the *aham* (love) concept in the Tamil literature.

Muruha is always portrayed in sculpture on the peacock mount with His two spouses and His spear. The peacock denotes the universe which He pervades. Valli and Devasena represent *Icha-sakti* (volition) and *Kriya sakti* (action); the spear represents *Jnana sakti* (Supreme Knowledge). In religion and philosophy He is just another manifest form of the Supreme Siva. One of the six sects of the *Shanmata* concept is Kaumara, the worship of Kumara. His *mantra* is the six lettered mystic symbol, *Saravana bhava*. His *natal* star is Visaka and favourite flower is kadambu.

He is associated with a number of poets and incidents in Tamil literary history. He appeared as the dumb judge to select the best commentary on *Iraiyanar Kalaviyal*. He saved Nakkirar from the clutches of the monster on the banks of a tank. He humbled the pride of Avvai. Many hold that Tiru Jnanasambandhar is the avatara of Muruha which is incorrect because in Saivism there can be no *avatara*). He gave the first lines to the songs of Arunagiri nathar and Kumaraguruparar and also for *Kandapurānam*.

Muruha festivals are the most popular festivals for the people, particularly the masses. They undertake long treks to His hill or shrine in large groups carrying milk and rice in a device called *kavadi* carried on the shoulders.

All his names such as Skanda (when the six forms were united) Arumukha, Seyon Dandayudhapani Velan and Swaminatha (one who gave out the meaning of Pranava to Siva Himself) are pregnant with significance. Skanda *shashti* in the month of Aippasi is His most important six-day festival.



## SIVA

The concept of Siva is as old as the Vedas. The phrase *namas Sivaya* occurring in the 11th *anuvaka* of the Krishna yajur veda (the exact centre of all the Vedas) is taken to mean not only the name of Siva but His very *panchakshara mantra* itself. The word *Sivam* occurring in the early upanishad, the *Mandukya*, as *Santam Sivam Chaturtham* makes particular reference to Him, although the term is deemed to refer to God as the giver of all good.

*Tolkappiyam*, the earliest writing available in the Tamil language, does not mention Siva while setting apart four regions to four deities, obviously because Siva is the deity for all things created, not only for all the four regions. The Mohenjadaró excavations have made clear the existence of Siva (linga) worship in India some 3500 years ago. Siva may not be a Sanskrit word but a mystic symbol by which the Supreme was indicated in ancient Tamilnad. Scholars would claim that Siva is of a crimson hue, the colour of fire; He is of the form of fire, as indicated in the Tiru Annamalai legend, where Brahma and Vishnu were unable to find the crown and the foot of the *Joti* (column of Light) that appeared before them. The *Kenopanishad* story of the appearance of Uma before Indra when Agni and Vayu were unable to know who the Light that appeared before them was, would also indicate the same concept, namely that He derived the name Siva because of his red, fire-like lustre.

In Saivism, Siva is formless, *arupa*. To help the human mind, forms have been attributed to Him so that man's senses can grasp them and, through them, can contemplate on Siva. Such manifest forms are said to be twentyfive and even sixty four - such as Nataraja, Dakshinamurti, Ganesa, Kumara, Chandrasekhara and so on. These are *rupa*, form. There is also a formless form, *ruparupa* and that is the Sivalinga installed in the innermost sanctum in any Siva temple. All puja is done to this linga, *Sadasiva*. Besides, Siva is considered to dwell in the eight places - in the five elements, the sun and moon and the individual soul. Thus the Transcendent Being is also Immanent for man.

Temples had been dedicated to Siva from the known periods of history and ceremonial worship is performed there for the Linga as laid down in the Agamas. The worship is for the welfare of the community at large. The initiated Saiva is taught to perform a puja in his home on the same ceremonial lines for the welfare of himself and his family.

Siva does not incarnate; He does not come on earth through taking a form in the womb of any woman. *Silappadhikaram* calls him "the Great One whose body is never born." All the forms assumed by Him are through His own Grace.

Each of the thousands of Siva temples which dot the Tamil country came into existence when Siva's grace was bestowed on a particular individual in some unknown past. Siva probably manifested Himself in a piece of stone in the shade of a tree or plant. This subsequently came to be called a Linga and the plant was hailed as the temple tree *sihala viruksha* of the place. The Saiva preceptors like Appar, Tiru Jnanasambandar and Sundarar visited the places and sang their *Devaram* songs there. These attracted all the people in the locality. The Chola emperors realized the great value of the temples to society and built magnificent temples in stone in numberless places. They exist today in all their glory proclaiming the Grace of God, the sweetness of the Nayanmar songs, and the monumental services of the Emperors.

Siva has the bull as his mount and as his banner. He is said to be fond of an *abhisheka* (bathing) in *pancha gavya* (five products obtained from the cow). His great exploits are said to be eight performed in eight places – plucking away one of the five heads of Brahma, destruction of Anthakasura, of the Tiripura asuras, of Daksha yajna, of the elephant trained on Him by the rishis of Daruka vanam, of Yama the God of Death, of Cupid and Jalandarasura. Five elements are special to Him in five places—earth at Tiru Arur, water at Tiru Anaikka, fire at Tiru Annamalai, air at Tirukkalatti and ether (*akasa*) at Chidambaram. His forms as Nataraja and Dakshinamurti are compulsory for all temples.

Siva is Omnipresent, Omnipotent and omniscient. He pervades the universe and yet is the indweller in every soul-directing it, giving it experience. In the pure advaita philosophy, He is the experience, the Giver of it and the Experiencer of it. The paths to realize Siva are four in Saivism, *charya* (personal discipline), *kriya* (ritualistic worship), *yoga* (developing the inner power towards realization) and *jnana* (realization through Supreme Knowledge). A vein of Bhakti runs through all the four paths. Siva performs all the five function of creation, preservation, dissolution, obscuration and conferment of Grace through His inseparable Sakti which is Grace itself. When we speak of Siva, it should be borne in mind that He is not one of the Trimurtis, usually called Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra; they derive their power and perform their functions under His direction.



## SAKTI

Sakti means Power. It is always represented in the female aspect and placed as the Energy aspect of Siva who is pure Intelligence. Sakti is considered the consort of Siva, inseparable from Him. *Kenopanishad* mentions Her as Uma, the daughter of Himavan. *Brihadaranayaka upanishad* and *Svetasvatara* further elaborate the concept.

In ordinary language She is taken as the consort of Siva, in three aspects as *Ichha akti* (volition), *Kriya sakti* (action) and *Jnana sakti* (knowledge). Like the word and its sense, the body and the soul, the flame and its light, the flower and its fragrance, milk and its sweetness, Sakti is inseparable from Siva. Sakti is the aspect of Siva's Grace-*Arul*; Siva performs His five functions through the agency of Sakti.

The concept of Siva-Sakti is given a form in the Puranas for purposes of worship in the temple and that is the Amba or Ambikai, Parvati or Uma. In this aspect She is the Supreme Mother, the benevolent creator and sustainer. As the bestower of prosperity, She is Lakshmi. As the giver of Knowledge She is Sarasvati. She is of the pranava form *aum*; when the letters are transposed, *uma* – we have the Uma form. She is the Parasakti. She is known as Manonmani in the aspect of consort for Sadasiva.

The cult of the worship of Sakti as the Supreme Being is called *Saktam* and although there are quite a number of poems on Sakti holding Her as the Supreme, the Sakta cult does not appear to have existed in Tamilnad. From the early period to the modern day it had been an exclusive cult in Bengal. Numberless devotional poems in Sanskrit and Tamil sing her praises. In all Siva temples, there is a separate shrine for Sakti, usually south-facing. She is portrayed only with two arms. But where She is given an independent shrine, she is given four arms of which two represent the *varada* and *abhaya* poses. In many important shrines, she is represented as doing a penance for being united with Siva. In the ten-day annual festival of all the Siva shrines, the seventh day is the *Tiru-Kalyanam* or wedding festival.

Sakti is given a distinctive name in each little or big shrine based on local legends and also on the hymns of the Nayanmar. In the early periods, an icon was placed for Her in the Siva sanctum itself but a separate sub-shrine known as the *Kamak-kottam* came to be set apart for Her from the days of the Chola Emperor, Kulotunga II (12th century).

She is worshipped in different names, each a particular connotation. Parvati is a general name, signifying that she is the daughter of the Hima parvata. As Minakshi she ruled over Madurai as the daughter of the Pandiyas and wedded Siva as Lord Sundaresa. She is Kamakshi in Kanchipuram worshipping Ekambaranatha. In Banaras she is Visalakshi, the consort of Lord Visvanatha. As Annapurni in Banaras itself She is the Giver of food and sustenance to the entire universe.

As Rajarajeswari, She is the presiding deity over the Sri Chakra in the Sakta cult, also called the Sri Vidya Upasana. She is Bhagavati in Kanyakumari doing penance. As Abhirami in Tirukkadavur, the place where Yama was kicked away by Siva in order to help his boy-devotee, Markkandeya, she is even today shedding Her grace and giving long life to worshippers. As Lalita, she destroyed Bandasura and the *Lalita Sahasranama* was listed in Her honour. The commentary of Bhaskararaya on this sahasra nama is important; She is the presiding deity for Prayag.

Sakti is described in the puranas as the younger sister of Vishnu, the Preserver, and this is quite fitting. The Ardhanarisvara form in the temples is a visual representation of the Concept of Oneness or Inseparability of Siva and Sakti. Here Siva occupies the right half while Sakti is in the left. The Uma-Mahesvara and Somaskanda forms signify the same concept.

There are also some fierce aspects of Sakti. The Saptamata are all energies of male deities but aspects of Sakti specifying certain occasions when they took form. Two main aspects of Sakti are Durga and Kali. The first was assumed for the destruction of the asura, Durga, and later, the buffalo-headed asura (demon) Mahishasura, personification of ignorance.

Kali is another fierce aspect of Sakti. She is also called Chamundi, who appeared for the destruction of the asuras, Chanda and Munda. Kalidasa wrote his *Shyamala dandakam* on this Kali aspect. She is the presiding deity for the city of Ujjain.

But there are some other deities known by many different names like Mari, Pidari, etc., but they are petty deities worshipped by the illiterate out of fear and they have no entry or relevance in a Siva temple. A number of Mari temples, modern as well as ancient, have become important by the vast hordes of people that throng there and by the vast wealth that has accumulated there, but yet they are all petty deities not having any relevance in Siva worship.



## NATARAJA

We shall now try to understand the form of Nataraja. Just to implant the idea of super-human power, Nataraja has been given four arms. This is a general symbolic feature in all Indian iconography. Additional hands mean simply power. The right foot of Nataraja is planted on a little demon. The left is lifted and held across it. Of the four arms, the left back arm holds a fire in the palm; the right back arm holds a small drum; the forward arm is just held up, palm in front, in the pose of benediction or granting solace. The left forward arm is just held in a sweep. At the back of the form of Nataraja there is a circular arc and on it there are 51 little flames. All these are not mere parts of the form, but are conceived with a definite philosophic connotation.

The large round arc denotes the entire universe. Nataraja does not dance in any one particular place; the entire cosmos is the stage on which He performs His unceasing Dance. Now the drum sounds when He dances and produces the primordial sound *OM*. This is known in other mythologies also as the music of the spheres. Sound was created first and from the subtle sound, gross matter slowly condensed itself. Now again, the sound which emanates from the drum is not any meaningless noise, but the first letters, vowels and consonants, which are considered to be the alphabets in Sanskrit. The 51 little flames on the outer edge of the arc represent those 51 sounds. From sounds speech emanated, and from speech, knowledge; in short, the sounding of the drum is symbolic of creation.

Next we see the right forward palm facing us. It is symbolic of the Supreme Power's nourishment and protection extended to the subjects created. The hand so held signifies peace and that stands for the orderly preservation and sustenance of the universe.

Now the fire in the left backward arm denotes naturally destruction. This signifies the destruction or dissolution of the whole universe, consisting of not only matter but also of all living beings. It symbolises what others call the Deluge. The Saiva concept is that during innumerable births the soul does certain acts, reaps the fruits of those acts, and then the body dies and then again the soul is reborn; it again commits acts and so on the cycle goes on endlessly. When God finds that some respite is necessary for the soul from this cycle of births, activity and death, He causes this Deluge, *pralaya*. Souls are then given some rest. Then again they are reborn. Death does not mean destruction. It only means rest before another course of birth and activity starts.

The planted right foot stands on a demon. The demon is symbolic of the individual's ego and ignorance. But for this ego, the soul could simply surrender itself to the Almighty or God and be happy in the peace and bliss resulting there from. The ego obstructs such a surrender. It is personified here as a demon called *Muyalaka* which the Lord tramples down. Once this is snuffed out, the soul can be free to realise its goal of joy and oneness with God.

Lastly, we have the lifted left foot. This is held in a free pose of poise and ease. This is symbolic of the Lord's Grace. This is unconditional mercy shown to the soul. Grace is always spoken of as the Foot of the Lord and the liberated soul is said to take its eternal rest in Grace, that is, under the lifted Foot. This is the culmination in the Saiva religion of the spiritual effort of the individual, that is, to rest under the Feet of the Lord, to abide in His Mercy and Grace. This is an eternal bliss from which there is no return, and there are no more births and no more deaths.

Nataraja may be seen to have a tender smile on His countenance. This is symbolic of His welcome even to the errant soul which may seek shelter under His Grace and His unconditional mercy.

This in short is the form of Nataraja. He creates for the souls the world, the instruments for experience, the objects for experience and the very experience itself, then gives them protection and, ultimately, He resolves the entire universe. In accordance with the acts done by the individual, his intellect is clouded and is obscured. Lastly, at the right moment, when, through successive births, the soul has evolved spiritually, the conferment of Grace occurs. These are the five functions of Nataraja and they are called in Saivism: Creation, Preservation, Dissolution, Obscuration and Conferment of Grace. The Dance of Nataraja is the performance of these five-fold functions.

God exists in the temple, only for him who realises Him as the One residing and dancing in the innermost recess of his own heart. Once this understanding comes to him, he will comprehend the Dance of Nataraja, both in the microcosm and in the macrocosm, the infinitesimal and the infinite. Nataraja dances in the heart and dances in the universe. The wise and the enlightened realise this and give themselves up to God. This is the significance of the Dance of Nataraja.



## VISHNU

Vishnu is mentioned in the Vedas and in a later period, He is held to be the deity (one of the Tirimurti) who does the function of preservation. But in the concept of Vaishnava philosophy, Vishnu is the Supreme Being who governs all the functions.

He is called *Tirumal* in the Tamil literary tradition and made a tutelary deity for the *mullai* (forest) region, presumably because as Krishna he was brought up by the cowherds who are the people of the forest region. Worship of Vishnu was indeed quite ancient in Tamilnad as this concept of *mullai* would indicate.

Speaking of the boundaries of the Tamil speaking areas, all the early Tamil books would say that Tiru Venkatam (modern Tirupati), the hill of Vishnu, is the northern limit. *Silappadhikaram* has some very fine devotional verses on Tirumal. *Paripadal*, one of the Sangham poems, has also a few fine verses on Him.

The Alvar have sung their *Nalayira prabandham* on Vishnu enshrined in the various temples all over Tamilnad. They are traditionally said to be 108, sung by the alvar. But yet a few more exist. During all this period, up to the 10th century, Vishnu worship had not assumed the status of a distinct cult. Only from the days of Ramanuja it became a separate cult with a philosophy and mode of observance all its own. He introduced the *Tiruman* (the Vaishnava mark on the forehead) and laid down a specific code of rituals for the Vaishnavas and their temple worship. From his day, Vaishnavism took on a new colour and new life.

Vishnu is said to have had ten *avataras*, descents into the earth or incarnation. They are the *Matsya* (fish) *Kurma* (turtle), *Varaha* (boar) *Narasimha* (man-lion), *Vamana* (dwarf), *Parasurama* (Rama with an axe) *Rama* (the hero of the *Ramayana*), *Balarama* (elder brother of Krishna), Krishna (the son of Vasudeva) and Kalki (a future avatara with a horse head). The stories connected with Rama and Krishna are well known. Major temples may have the images of all the avataras, but those of the Varaha, Narasimha, Rama and Krishna are generally considered important for all. An evolutionary order may be noticed in the avataras; they are all Vishnu and they command equal veneration as Vishnu Himself.

The states of Vishnu or Narayana as he is known are said to be five. They are the Param-Sureme as Para Vasudeva; Vyahamp being the four forms-Vasudeva, Samkarshana, Pratyumna and Aniruddha; Vibhavam - all the avatara forms; Antaryami - the indweller in every soul; and Archa - the image installed in every temple. Of all the incarnations of Vishnu, those of Rama and of

Krishna are important to His followers. The story of Rama has been composed in Sanskrit by Valmiki in 24000 slokas while Kambhar had written it in over 10000 Tamil verses. The story of Krsihna has been written in many *Bhagavata puranas* in Sanskrit while they had been written in two *Bhagavata puranas* in Tamil of nearly 5000 and 9200 verses in the 16th century. These two avataras have also endeared themselves to the Alvar who had sung many of their songs on them. The avataras themselves had purpose as mentioned by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita-the protection of good and the punishment of evil.

*Bhagavad Gita*, given out as instruction to the perplexed Arjuna on the battle-field by Krishna who had assumed the role of his charioteer is not only an important book for the Vaishnavas but also has become one of the three basic texts – *the Prasthanas Traya* – the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras and the Gita – of all Hinduism.

Vishnu is always represented in the temples with form, in either of three postures, the standing, the sitting and the reclining. Rarely do some shrines have all the three forms in three tiers, as in Kudal-Alahar temple at Madurai. The temple of Sri Rangam is the seat of the Tenkalai (Southern) sect while Kanchi is the seat of the Vadakalai (Northern) sect.

As Narayana, the Milky ocean is His abode. The thousand headed Adisesha is His couch. Garuda is His mount and banner. Sri (Lakshmi) is His Sakti, whom He has placed on His chest. He is of blue complexion. Brahma, the creator, was born out of His navel. The basil leaf is His favourite flower. His celestial abode is Vaikuntham, also called Paramapadam. The earth or Bhudevi is also represented as His Consort. A mole on His breast called Sri Vatsam is His distinguishing mark. Kaustubham, a gem, is worn by him on His breast. He wields the *panchayudha*, the five weapons-the conch, *chakra*, bow, sword and mace.

Besides the usual ten avataras, He is considered to have taken other avataras numbering fifteen on different occasions.

The followers of Vishnu are in two categories Vaikhanasas or followers of sage Vikhanas and Pancharatris. the others (followers of Ramanuja).

Songs in praise of Vishnu both in Sanskrit and in Tamil are innumerable. His mantra is the eight syllables, the ashtakshara, *Om Namo Narayanaya*. Of the 18 maha puranas, four puranas speak of His glory.



## LAKSHMI

Called *Sri* (Sanskrit) and *Tiru* (Tamil), she is the Muse of beauty and prosperity. The Vedic concept on this deity is different. Only from the puranic age, we have the modern concept. She came out of the ocean of milk when it was churned by the Asuras and the Devas for obtaining nectar and when she emerged from the ocean, she was taken by Vishnu as His Consort and kept on his chest. The first to be born out of the sea was the elder, the *Jyesta*, called in Tamil *Mudevi*, the precursor of all misfortunes. Lakshmi rose from the sea after her and so she is the younger. In the Tamil language, the simple terms Elder and Younger are self-explanatory. She is also born on earth during all the avatars of Vishnu; Sita, Rukmini etc. are all Lakshmi. She is of a red (or golden) hue and her abode is the red lotus. Vishnu has two consorts, the other being Bhudevi.

The word *Sri* means she that is worshipped by people, and she who worships for the people. In the latter sense she is the one who intercedes with Vishnu and prays for the redemption of the individual. This concept is known as *purushakara* in Vaishnavism.

Jyesta is one of the *ashtaparivaras*, the deities in the sub-temples of Siva; she is so installed in most of the larger temples. Lakshmi has a place in the *Vayu* corner (north western) where she is installed in a distinctive sub-temple. She is normally flanked by two elephants which have a raised pot at the tip of their trunks. The pots are full of gems and they are now being rained on her, this being appropriate to the concept of her as the giver of all prosperity. Two other arms hold two lotus flowers, while the inner are in the *abhaya* and the *varada* pose.

All temple representations of Lakshmi are only in the sitting posture. The Ravi varma picture of Lakshmi as a modern woman (with four arms) standing on a red lotus is not warranted by the *sastras*.

In the Vishnu temple to which she belongs by right as His consort, her stone image is in a separate temple where she is called *Nachiyar* (consort) and more endearingly as *Taayaar* (the Mother). But in Vishnu's sanctum, she is along with Bhudevi, both in stone, with the *mulavar*, and in bronze, with the *utsavar*.

## DAKSHINAMURTI

This is one of the 64 manifest forms of Siva and it is the form of God as the Universal Guru. He is always placed in the niche on the southern outer wall of the sanctum of any Siva temple, facing south. He is represented in stone, in the sitting posture. The hanging right foot is placed on the *Muyalaka* (*Abhasmara*) who is the personification of ignorance or the ego. The foot is supposed to dispel the ignorance of the worshipper. Variants of the Dakshinamurti form are the Vinadhara, Jnana and Yoga Dakshinamurti. There are a few differences in the depiction of each in the sculptures.

In a place called Omampuliyur on the northern bank of the Kollidam in the South Arcot district, Dakshinamurti is kept in a large hall usually occupied by Nataraja, who is here kept in an outer niche, in stone. Dakshinamurti is in the usual sitting posture and He is about six feet in height. In this shrine, Uma Devi is said to have been instructed in the esoteric significance of the *Pranava* and so this special hall for the Guru, Dakshinamurti.

The spiritual teacher has the highest place of honour in Saivism (as also in Vaishnavism). The Sastras say that Siva Himself appears as the guru at the proper moment and directs the bhakta on the godward path. Dakshinamurti in the Siva temple is the visual representation of the Supreme Guru. Under the spreading ficus tree (*kallaal*) in Kailas, this murti was seated in the pose of perfect peace and bliss; His form was that of a youth of sixteen years: four aged rishis (sages) Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanatkumara came to Him for spiritual instruction. He did not utter a word but his very pose gave them all the instruction they needed and they departed, enlightened and all their doubts dispelled.

The pose of the right hand of Dakshinamurti is known as the *Chinmudra*; the *mudra* of supreme knowledge. The right hand rests on the right knee, palm up: the forefinger bends, to touch the base of the thumb, itself released from contact with the other three fingers which stand out each separately and also separated from the forefinger. The thumb is the symbol of the Supreme God, the forefinger is the soul, seeking eternal rest at the feet of God. When the forefinger touches the base of the thumb it automatically separates itself from the other three fingers; these three fingers represent the three bonds *anava*, *karma* and *maya*, and signify that the soul overcomes the bonds and attains final union with god.

The chinmudra is the visual representation which places the Saiva Siddhanta system of philosophy in a unique position among all the other systems.



## MINOR DEITIES

Minor deities have no place either in Saivism or in Vaishnavism. We should not mince matters, saying that they are also manifestations of the Supreme God. Minor deities, the smaller fry, took shape through man's fear, and miseries and hardship in life together with ignorant superstition keep these alive in man's life and faith. Let it not be understood that only the ignorant lower classes are attracted by the minor deities. Superstition is not the monopoly of the illiterate or uneducated poor. Those called higher and educated classes are even greater victims of superstition. The instances of minor deities are many but we shall here confine ourselves to only a few.

The first instance is the goddess Mariammai. She was originally considered to be the goddess of rain (*mari-rain*). But that is a benevolent aspect. People throng more towards the malevolent aspect. So she was later made the great Mari (*Mahamari*), the goddess responsible for mahamari (small pox). Small pox is the most dreaded of all afflictions and so as the controller and dispenser of this foul disease, she commands the greatest homage, respect and awe from all people. It is distressing to mention here that the brahmins considered the advanced class are some of the chief votaries of them. Others naturally follow the lead of the brahmins. The smārtha brahmins have the cult of *aham brahmasmi* 'I am the Brahman': they have no inherent injunction to worship any deity; hence any deity is good for them. They as a rule see no difference between Mari or Sakti for example. They declare that Mari is an aspect of Sakti. To lend authority to the myth Mari is given a high sounding name as *Sitala devi* and an interpolated chapter in the *Karanagama* prescribes her consecration and worship. Animal sacrifices yet continue to be made to her. She has yet no place inside a Siva temple. Mari has a hundred different names in different temples such as Selli, Alai, Solai, Draupadi, Kanniyammai etc.

Similar is the case with Aiyanar, worshipped as Hariharaputra. But he is a benevolent deity and yet he also has no place within any Siva temple. He is called the Sasta the upholder of Dharma, the Dharma sasta. No sacrifice has been permitted in his temple.

The sasta cult has assumed great importance in the seventies of the twentieth century. Sasta knows no caste bar; the brahmins elbow with the lowest castes in their treks to the Sasta shrines. The Sasta cult had been one of the two cults in Kerala (the

other being the more ancient Bhagavati cult) and it has now gained great popularity. The Tamil people blindly imitate the Kerala people like 'dumb driven cattle' in the trek to Sabarimalai, dressed in black, unshaven, observing many vigils. In the treks the brahmin youth easily outnumber the rest.

There are some Mari temples in Tamilnad today whose annual income through daily collection from votaries goes to six figures. One temple sports a golden chariot for the deity; on payment of stipulated fees, the chariot is drawn along the inner corridors of the temple for the satisfaction of the devotees. They are all testimonials to the ignorance and gullibility of the so called worshippers. The Mari cult has no ennobling feature and no philosophy which could uplift the worshipper spiritually.

Both Mari and Aiyanar have been conceived of as tutelary deities in ancient Tamilnad town-planning where they have been provided temples not within the living areas of the village or town, but on the outskirts thereof, so that they may discharge their functions by remaining outside the living quarters.

Whatever the brahmin does becomes a fashion. The fashion set by him is followed blindly by the other particularly in religious matters. Otherwise one cannot explain the great popularity of some new modern temples like the Vaishnavi temple and the Mahalakshmi temple. An affluent brahmin, son of a top patriot in the freedom struggle, became a Sannyasi (ascetic) and founded the Vaishnavi temple on a suburb of the city of Madras. Instantly it became famous and people have begun to swear by Vaishnavi. Vaishnavi is merely one of the Sapta Mata (the seven celestial mothers), aspects of Sakti's power and she is never conceived of as an independent deity apart from the group. But she is the craze in modern Madras.

Similar is Mahalakshmi. The concept of Lakshmi is very high. She is the mother of all, the *Taayaar*, Consort of Vishnu, in all the Vishnu temples. She has no separate existence and no separate glorification. Yet she is there on the sea coast of Madras, having a new fashionable temple for herself built in a totally unorthodox manner, where people throng in large numbers.

Saints Appar and Manikkavacakar sing that they would not go to the smaller fry because they go the path of the Supreme. Vaishnava saints sing likewise. But these temples of minor deities carry on merrily attracting large groups of votaries.



## SARASVATI

The consort of Brahma dwelling on his tongue is pure white, in white garments, with white jewels, seated on a white lotus. Knowledge is pure Light and white, so everything about her is white. She is Vagisvari, the deity governing *vak*, speech and intellect or all knowledge. She is said to have three eyes and matted locks. The Ravi varma picture of a modern seated woman with a *vina*, and a peacock by her side is not mentioned in the *Silparatnam*. As consort of Brahma, she holds the *kamandala* and *japamala* in the two outer hands, while the two inner hands are portrayed with a book and stylus. The swan is her mount. She is called *Kalaimahal* (of the arts) and *Namahal* (of the tongue). She is called in *Manimekhalai* the Devi governing thought and her temple is Kalai-niyamam. Only the major temples have her image, not all temples.

The Navaratri festival is generally known as the Sarasvati puja.

Many Tamil poets had been votaries of Sarasvati. One Kambar wrote an *antadi* in her praise and St. Kumaragurupara wrote his *Sakala Kalavallimalai* in her praise, to enable him to master Hindustani in Banaras. She is like the *saras* (lake) dwelling in *rasa* and flows like the river; so she is called Sarasvati. Sometimes she is represented with the upanishad as the head, Brahma vidya as the face, the four vedas as the four arms, grammar and logic as the two eyes, poetry and music as two breasts, puranas and itihasas as the feet, and pranava as the *vina*. The muse of learning is a common feature in classical western cultures also.

Sarasvati is held to be the patron deity for all arts (and crafts). The convention is that these are 64.

Just like the invocation to Ganesa invariably found in major Tamil poetical works of the later periods, there is also an invocation to Sarasvati in such poems. As consort of Brahma she is designated as Brahmi and placed as the first of the Saptamata. As she is worshipped in the *sarat* season (autumn), she is also called Sarada. The names Gayatri and Savitri would also apply to her.

Even non-Vedic religions worship Sarasvati. The day after Sarasvati puja is held generally to be auspicious to place the young child in the school. This is the Vijayadasami day. On this day children are admitted into the schools, and businessmen open new accounts. A Hindu convention is to consider all books as the seat of Sarasvati, even scraps of paper are the seat of Sarasvati, and one will not knowingly touch paper with his foot.

## SECTION 4

# TEMPLES



## TEMPLE HISTORY

The temple in Tamilnad is an institution of prehistoric antiquity, having a continuity of existence through the various centuries and through the many political upheavals in the land. The Tamil people have been a greatly religious people. The temple has played a prominent part in their history not only in religion but also in their social and cultural life. The chief characteristic of the temple in Tamilnad is its stress on two aspects of Hindu philosophy - monotheism and idol worship. The two-namely theistic philosophy and worship of one personal God-may be considered as the theory and practice of religion. Even prior to *Tolkappiyam* (c. 300 B.C.) there have been temples. The temples have been reverentially referred to in all the Sangham poetry. *Tiru Muruharuppadai*, a long Sangham poem in praise of Muruha, glorifies Muruha as the one Supreme Being, and gives details of his six places which are His temples or His sporting ground. Details of complete worship, similar to what is prevalent today, is found in the poem.

During the period, we had the Dancing Hall of Nataraja, Ponnambalam (Golden Hall) at Chidambaram, and Velliambalam (the Silver Hall) at Madurai.

The early temples would have been of mud with thatch, later on, timber, and further on, made of brick and mortar. The biggest temple builder was Kochengat Chola (5th century A.D.) who, according to Tirumangai Alvar the great Vaishnava Saint, had built 70 shrines for Siva on a raised base. All these temples are in existence today. He might have built them only in brick and mortar.

The Pallavas come into the picture during this period and they have introduced a new style, what is called today the monolithic temples or cave temples. These emperors from Kanchipuram chose huge hillocks, had a complete temple structure in their mind and scooped out everything else from the hillock, leaving behind only the temple - the whole temple complex consisting of the sanctum, the images therein, the various mandapas, doorways, corridors, roofs and the architectural and sculptural details on the roofs and the towers thereon. All constitute one single rock. Today it staggers our imagination, how such a thing could have been conceived of or executed. Nothing like this has ever been attempted since.

The next period is the period of huge temple construction where the temples were built by piling up cut stones brought from distant quarries to the temple site. This is the golden era of temple

construction. We witness more than a 1000 such temples all over Tamilnad, chiefly in the modern Tanjavur district, where not a single rock exists! The first temple was built by Rajaraja Chola I (985 – 1014) at Tanjavur and that had been the model and inspiration for all the later temples. These temples were preceded by the great Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, constructed by Rajasimha Pallava (686–705). The stones used by him were not granite but stones of inferior quality which have been ravaged by the passing of thirteen centuries.

The fortunes of Tamilnad had changed in the subsequent centuries by the deprivations of Muslim invaders, who had razed many huge temples to the ground. However, the Vijayanagar dynasty restored the temples to their past glory and even after the fall of the dynasty, the Nayaks, who were deputies under them, ruling from Madurai, Tiruchirappalli and Tanjavur, had given liberally to the construction and maintenance of temples, festivals and temple servants. They had introduced a new type of sculpture also in their temples. The temple towers on the outer walls of the temples are a spectacular installation of the Nayaks.

The Siva temples from the Chola period have nourished a number of fine arts of the country unknown elsewhere. They follow in their construction the *Agamas* and the *Silpa sastras*. The architecture is something unique. Almost all the temples still exist in their early glory with their carved figures in stone and in bronze. We may have 1000 Natarajas in 1000 temples but one is not a copy of another. Each has an indefinable mystic quality which holds the mind spell-bound and enthralled. A perceptive round of a single average temple is enough to teach the receptive mind, all the glory of our rich heritage.

Painting, music and dance had been fostered by the temples. A vast literature has grown around each. Every temple had a sanctified temple tank and a temple tree (*stala-vriksha*) which speaks volumes for the Hindu view of life, namely that the vegetable kingdom is also a creation of God, and of the Hindu reverence to all God's creations.

In all these ways, it can be seen that the temple has been the hub of the social and cultural life of the Tamil people which it continues to be even in the modern day of many disruptive tendencies.



## THE TEMPLE COMPLEX

The Saiva temple is generally situated in the centre of the village and the whole village or town had grown round the temple. The temple used to be the pride of the locality and the occasions of its daily worship, periodical worship and annual festivals attracted all the people of the village, besides many from the neighbouring places. Usually, the temple was east-facing; a few may be west-facing, having three *prakaras* or circuits round the temple. Over the main entrance on the outer wall, there will be a tall gopura of 5 to 11 tiers. A small Ganapati temple adorns the entrance on the southern side. Passing three doorways, we reach the sanctum. Here the Sivalinga is installed. In Saiva philosophy, the Absolute God is conceived of in three ways: one, the Formless which cannot be grasped by the senses; two, the Form such as Nataraja, Ganapati, Muruha etc. which is the object of worship; and three, the Formless Form i.e. something concrete before our eyes but having no form, which is the Sivalinga. All worship in the Siva temple is to the Sivalinga. Only the Sivacharya goes into the sanctum to perform a worship, not for himself, not for anyone else, but for the welfare of the entire community. This is the grand conception of temple worship in Tamilnad.

In the large hall in front of the sanctum there is the Dance Hall of Nataraja, to the left. Nataraja and His consort here are always in bronze. The *vimanas* over the Sivalinga shrine have only one *kalasa* or cupola but the Hall of Nataraja has always three or five kalasas. Further to the east of the Nataraja Hall, there is a sub-shrine for Sakti, generally south-facing. Sakti is *abhinna* (not separate from Siva). In the second millennia A.D. the Sakti shrine came to be separated from the sanctum.

The second *prakara* is round the sanctum and here, in the outer walls of the sanctum, in different niches, we have some deities. On the south, Dakshinamurti is imparting the greatest knowledge to the most learned sages by his instruction through silence.

Lingotbhava murti, symbolising the truth that God cannot be comprehended through any knowledge or attained through any power, is placed in the central niche in the west. On the north over the water sprout through which *abisheka* water flows out, there is Brahma, the creator. Though Brahma had been denied a temple in Tamilnad by the puranas, he has always this place in the temple. Further east there is a separate small shrine for Chandesa. After that, Durga is worshipped in another special niche. Durga is no

separate Goddess. She is just an aspect of Sakti, a Form taken to suppress some evil forces.

Along this *prakara* on the outer side, large temples may have the images of the 63 Saiva saints in the south. On the west in separate sub-temples we have Vinayaka in the southwest, Muruha in the centre and Lakshmi in the northwest. On the eastern side Surya, Bhairava, and Sani are installed in the northeast. On the south east is the temple kitchen.

This is the general plan of the Siva temple. Details and other forms of deities may be added where there are several more prakaras. All the deities mentioned so far are only in stone except Nataraja and His Consort.

For occasions of festivals the temples have bronze icons for Somaskanda, Ganapati, Muruha with Consorts, Sakti and Chandesa. In large temples there may be additions like Bhikshatana etc.

Every temple has its sacred temple tank, mostly within the temple walls and sometimes outside the temple wall. The *sthalavriksha* is important for every temple. This tree had a long time back given shelter to a piece of stone through which Lord Siva manifested Himself to the devotees and ever since, that tree is being worshipped as the temple tree. Sometimes it is a creeper like jasmine or even grass.

The conception of the Vishnu temple is similar but the details in the sub-temples is lacking. Vishnu and His Consort, Lakshmi, are housed in separate shrines. Lakshmi, who is the Sakti of Vishnu is affectionately called *Taayaar*, the Mother. In the Vishnu temple, according to local legends, we have the Forms of Krishna in various forms like Venugopala, Navanita Krishna etc. and Rama, Narasimha and Varahamurti are given importance in many temples. Vishvakshena, the leader of Vishnu's forces, is always installed. Andal is always found in many temples and sometimes some of the other alvar. The Chakra of Vishnu (as Sudarsanalvar), Garuda and Hanuman have pride of place.

Vishnu is represented in one of three Forms – the reclining form, the sitting form and the standing form. Presentation of tirtha, sacred water, the placing of Sathari (the feet of God on the head of the devotee) and the giving of *tulasī* (basil leaves) with food-offering go with Vishnu worship.

The Siva temple distributes only sacred ash and *kumkum* as *prasaada*.



## CHIDAMBARAM

The most holy of holy shrines for all the Saivas, wherever they may live. In the Tamil language, *koil* is a common noun meaning a temple. But as a proper noun it means Chidambaram. Lord Siva, the Supreme in Saivism, performs His Cosmic Dance in this shrine and hence its importance. The place is also known as Tillai, after the tree *tillai* (*excoccaria*) which is the temple tree here.

The temple complex covers an area of 40 acres, having three outer walls and a tall and wide tower (gopura) in the middle of each of the four second walls. The city has grown round the four walls of the temple. The shrine goes back to the pre-Christian era. The Sivaganga tank inside the temple covers more than one third of an acre, with stone steps all round and stone covered corridors and halls on all the four sides.

Nataraja in a pre-historic period performed His Dance here for two sages Vyagrapada and Patanjali on the *Ardra* day in the month of *Marhali* (December-January) which is celebrated as the greatest festival in the temple. Every Siva temple in the land has a separate bronze icon of Nataraja in a separate hall, for celebrating the same annual *Ardra darsan*.

Nataraja of this shrine is installed in the sanctum known as the *Chit sabha* (the Hall of Supreme Knowledge). In front is a hall where the devotees may stand and worship; this is called *Kanaka sabha*, the Golden Hall, because successive Chola and Pandiya emperors have goldplated the tiles of the roof which are a marvel even to this day. Lord Nataraja had been the patron deity for all the Chola emperors, during their entire reign of nearly four and a half centuries.

Within the temple there are again five dance halls – the two mentioned already, the *Nrutta sabha*, *Raja sabha* and *Deva sabha*. *Nrutta sabha* is the hall where Nataraja lifted up his right foot straight above in a dance contest with Kali. The defeated Kali is enshrined in a separate temple to the north west of the shrine in a separate shrine, which also attracts a large crowd of people today. The *Nrutta sabha* is constructed in the form of a chariot depicting the legend of Siva marching on the Tripura asuras and destroying them. This *sabha* is one of the earliest pieces of architecture in the whole temple complex. The *Raja sabha* is the 1000 pillared hall from where Nataraja after His special *abhisheka*, starts for his Dance. *Deva sabha* is the place *Perambalam* where His jewels are kept.

In the concept of temples dedicated to the five elements, Chidambaram denotes *akasa*. A small curtained enclosure to the right of Nataraja is said to denote this concept. A special *spatika linga* (of quartz crystal) and a special ruby Nataraja are given special *abhisheka* daily on the Kanaka sabha in the forenoon.

His consort is known as Sakti Sivakamasundari. Her special shrine was built in the 12th century, a little to the north within the temple complex, to the west of the tank. Further north is the *Pandiya nayakam*, large temple of Subrahmanya.

Tirumulattanesvara with his consort is the aspect of Sivalinga in this place; His temple is to the north Nataraja-Karpaka Vinayaka after the Western gopura and Mukkuruni-arisi-Vinayaka (a very large Ganapati) after the southern gopura are important Ganapati sub-temples.

The Ardra darsan is a ten-day festival and it is repeated on the Uttiram day in Ani (June-July).

Limitless is the literature that has grown round this shrine. The three *Devaram* singers have glorified the place in many of their songs. St. Manikkavacakar pointed to Nataraja saying "He is the substance of all my songs" and entering the Sabha attained beatitude. All the authors in the Nineth book of the Saiva Canon, including the Chola monarch, Gandaraditta, have sung hymns in His honour. *Periya puranam*, the Saiva hagiology, was written and published here by Sekkilar at the request of the Chola Emperor Kulottunga II. Nandanar, the harijan saint, attained his beatitude here. Another harijan, Petran samban, was also raised to the heavens here by St. Umapati Sivacharya at the bidding of Lord Nataraja Himself. Umapati was the fourth Acharya of the Spiritual order for the Saivas and many incidents in his life, glorifying the Grace of Nataraja, occurred here.

True to the concept of this place being the Dance Hall of the Supreme God, all the dance poses mentioned in the sastras are carved on the northern and the eastern towers of the temple and today they are almost the sole visual illustrations for the sastra texts. They continue to inspire generations of dancers in the intricacies of the different *karanas* (poses) which are still a wonder to the practitioners of the art.

To the Vaishnavas, Chidambaram is *Tillai-Tiru Chitrakutam* where Vishnu is enshrined in the reclining posture in the name of Govinda raja in a separate shrine to the south of Nataraja's Hall. This form is sanctified in the songs of Kulasekhara Alvar and Tirumangai Alvar and is one of the 108 Vaishnava shrines.



## KANCHIPURAM

This city was the capital city of the Pallava Emperors from about 250 to 900 A.D. It is hailed in Sanskrit as the most beautiful city (*nagareshu Kanchi*) and as one of the seven cities which could confer *moksha*. The city was girt with high walls and moats but these have disappeared.

Kanchi is famous in history, education, art and religion. The great Pallava emperors, Mahendra varma, Narasimha and Rajasimha, who are famous in history for their monoliths at Mahabalipuram and many rock cut temples, ruled from here. After the disappearance of the Pallavas, Kanchi was an important city under the Cholas. Their northern expeditions as, for example, the one on the Kalingas, were undertaken with Kanchi as their base. The Hoysalas, Telugu Cholas etc., had seized the city in different periods till it was annexed to the Vijayanagar empire. It was ransacked by the Muhammedan forces and then it passed into the hands of the British. It was the capital of a district till 1830 and after nearly a century and a half it has again become the district capital.

During the early Pallava period, it was one of the greatest centres of Buddhist education in the whole of India. The great acharya Dignaga was born in Kanchi in a brahmin family and finally went to Nalanda. His works are held in high regard in China. Bodhidharma was another great scholar born in the royal family, who worked for Buddhism in China in the same period. Dharmapala, born in Kanchi and highly revered by the Pallavas, later became the Principa of Nalanda. The Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang has narrated the glory of Kanchi in his writings. The Tamil epic, *Manimekhalai*, testifies to the great scholarship of the city in Buddhism. There were, besides, Jain and Saiva institutions and maths dedicated to learning and education. Mayura sarman, founder of the Kadamba dynasty came to Kanchi for advanced studies.

All the fine arts received encouragement at Kanchi. Bharavi and Dandi, great Sanskrit poets, were at Kanchi in the Pallava courts. Many Tamil works were produced there. Some rulers of Kanchi were versed in instrumental music. The Pallava temples will tell us that Kanchi was also the centre of a great structural art – the arts of sculpture and architecture.

The city is famous for its Ekambaresvara temple which had been extolled in the Saiva hymns. Later legends and puranas say that there are 108 Siva shrines here. The forms of Siva are known

by different names but the name of the Sakti in all the temples is always Kamakshi.

The Kailasanathar temple is the greatest piece of temple architecture, in a style which is unique and not adopted anywhere else. Unfortunately it was built in sandstone and so has felt to a great extent the ravages of time. Yet the conception of the temple and its architectural workmanship are remarkable. It was built by Raja simha (686-705) who was a contemporary of St. Sundarar. When its date for kumbhabhishekam was fixed, Lord Siva told the King in his dream that He was attending the kumbhabhishekam of the mental temple of Pusalar. It is very remarkable that the inscription of the King mentions him as "He who listened to the voice from the Heavens." He calls himself an *agama priya* and a Saiva siddhantin.

Besides the Ekambareswvar temple, there are three others here sung by the Nayanmar and two more referred to by them. Similarly there are a number of Vishnu shrines here of which Athigiri is the most important. Vaikuntha perumal temple is, a unique temple of the Pallava period, enshrining Vishnu in the three postures—reclining, sitting and standing. An other Temple built by the Pallava ruler's queen has the form of Somaskanda in the sanctum wall, a feature common to ancient Pallava temples. Valisvaram has the Umamahesvara form on the sanctum panel.

Sekkilar dwells in great detail about the worship of Siva by Umadevi, mentioning therein that She learnt the *agama puja* from Siva and performed it here. Two crowned monarchs ruling from Kanchi have been counted as Saiva Nayanmar—Aiyadihal Kadavar-kon, author of Kshetra Tiruvenba, who is identified with Paramesvara varman and Kalaersingan with Raja simhan. Tiruk-Kuripputondar is a nayanar of Kanchi. Sundarar in his eyeless wanderings from Tiru Otriyur to Tiru Arur was given by Lord Siva in this place the vision of his left eye. Kachyappa Sivacharya wrote his large *Kanda puranam* giving out the stories of Muruha in the Kumarakottam shrine in this city. Muruha Himself prompting him, giving him the first line for the epic.

Poihai alvar the first of the twelve *alvar* was born on a golden lotus in a tank in the shrine of Tiru Vehha in Kanchi. The story of Kanikannan was also enacted in this shrine. When the ruler banished him and his guru, Tiru Malisai alvar, the Lord of Vehha followed the alvar and banished Himself.

Kanchi in the 14th century was the seat of Vedanta desikar, the founder of the Vadakalai sect in Vaishnavism.



## MADURAI

The second largest city in the state of Madras and the seat of a University, had been a historical city of the past, dating back perhaps to 500 B.C. It was the centre of the Third Tamil Sangham of the Pandiyas, from the 3rd century B.C. to about 250 A.D. It had been the capital of the Pandiyan emperors till the opening decades of the 14th century when it was sacked by the Muhammedans. There was a short period of the Muhammedan rule there after which the representatives of the Vijayanagar Emperors seized power and established the Nayak dynasty which came to an end with the British occupation.

Madurai is mentioned in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and also in some Greek references. The Pandiyas had trade contacts with Rome. The city had grown in concentric rows of streets round the Minakshi temple. According to legends Minakshi was ruling here as the Pandiya princess in pre-historic times when Siva came here as Lord Sundaresa, wedded Her and ruled over the kingdom. There are many puranas celebrating the stories of Sundaresa of which *Tiruvilaiyadal* by Paranjoti Munivar is the most valuable and popular. It celebrates the 64 sports or exploits of Sundaresa in which stories of Sambandhar and Manikkavacakar also find place. All classical literature speaks of the glory of Madurai and the literature is vast.

Madurai is a temple city. The main streets take their names after temple festivals. Almost every day is a festive day in the temple. Separate temples for Minakshi and Sundaresa are placed here in a parallel position, east facing; both are huge in size. There are huge tall towers on all the four sides, on more than one wall.

The Nayak rulers had beautified the temple with a considerable number of halls and carvings. Tirumalai Nayak was the greatest builder. His *Mahal* in the city was done without wood, in brick and mortar and is even today a marvel of workmanship.

Portrayals of the 64 exploits, the 49 poets of the Sangham period, the 25 manifest forms of Siva and the figures of most of the other deities require special mention. Besides the Mahal, the *Teppakulam* (tank) and the Tirupparamkunram temple close by are other sources of attraction here. River Vahai runs through the city and it is celebrated in all legends and *puranas*.

## RAMESVARAM

One of the major places of pilgrimage of an all India character for countless centuries connecting the North and the South. Worship at Banaras (Kasi) is not complete without a bath in the sea at Ramesvaram. There is a large stream of pilgrims every day from the north to this place. The place is at a southern tip of peninsular India. It takes its name from the linga installed there and worshipped by Rama to expiate the sin of having destroyed the Sivabhakta, Ravana. The deity here is Ramalingam and Ramanathaswami. This is one of the twelve *Jothir* lingas in India.

The Pamban canal separates the island of Ramesvaram from the main land. The island was part of the territory of the Raja of Ramanathapuram called Setupati, the 'master of the bridge' connecting Lanka with the main land.

The Ramanatha temple is famous for its ornate corridors running to a total length of 4000 feet with the many pillared galleries. The entrance to the temple is by the west *gopuram* which is wholly built of granite. Parakramabahu, ruler of Sri Lanka, constructed the sanctum of the temple in the 12th century. Tradition would hold that the major part of the temple was worked out in pieces of stone at Trincomalli in Sri Lanka in the 15-16 centuries, brought over from there and assembled here. The Setupati Rajas were the builders. Stucco work of the medieval period is also remarkable. Painting and ancient pieces of temple jewellery are other important attractions.

The temple is sanctified in the Devaram songs of St. Appar and Tiru Jnanasambandhar. There is also a large *purana* singing the glory of the shrine. Several other minor poems constitute the literature of the place.

The legend here is that Rama desirous of worshipping Siva, ordered Hanuman to get him a linga. But he stayed away too long. Rama was impatient. Sita made a Linga in sand and Rama worshipped this Linga which was thenceforth known as Ramalinga. But after a long time Hanuman brought another Linga and it was installed there as the modern Kasi Visvanatha. Sub-shrines in the temple include those of Vishnu as Setumadhavap-perumal and Hanuman. The large Nandi also deserves mention. Ramesvaram has 22 sacred *tirthams* or waters within the temple, each with its own legendary association.

The island of Ramesvaram is in the form of the conch (*sanku*) in the hand of Vishnu. The Ramesvaram temple possesses most of the characteristic features of Dravidian architecture.



## TANJAVUR

Emperor Raja raja I (985 – 1014) the great Chola emperor is renowned in Tamilnad not only as the architect of a great Chola empire but also as the architect of the Great Temple of Lord Brihaddisvara at Tanjavur. It is still a living tribute to the great architectural skill of the Tamils of the period. The very conception and execution of the temple is something grand in Tamilnad's long history of temple architecture. The distinguishing feature of this temple is the *vimana* over the sanctum which rises up unlike the towers of many other large temples which rise up on the gateway over the outer walls. This is not a gopura but a *vimana*, rising to a height of 216 feet. It is fully in stone while most towers of temples are in brick and mortar. Tanjavur is a place which has no granite. The stones for the entire temple had been brought over long distances, chiselled and carved and mounted on to their appropriate places. The love and devotion that have gone into the work and the skill of the artisans is something unequalled.

This is the first piece of original work that influenced the entire Tamilland by making all later temple architecture to be done in granite, against the general practice of brick and mortar till then. The vimana has been finely decorated with pilasters, niches and finely carved celestial figures. It is 96 feet square at the base and has a sikhara at the top, circular in shape. The coping stone over this is a single piece 25 feet square weighing 80 tons and the *kalasa*, 12½ feet in height, stands on this. The engineering skill which was able to raise a single stone of this huge weight to a height of over 200 feet a thousand years ago can only be marvelled at.

The reclining bull, wrongly called Nandi, is of a single stone, 12 feet high, on a pedestal, 19 feet by 8 and weighs 25 tons.

The inside of the vimana is hollow, and the whole is held in position just by the corbelling arrangement. There are frescoes on the inside and they present the original colours even after the lapse of a thousand years, thereby paying a glorious tribute to the fine art of painting.

The great temple was conceived of as a fortress and all around the four walls we find even today bastions for the stay of soldiers. The walls are surrounded by a large and deep moat.

The consecration of the great Temple drew forth a fine hymn from the Sage-poet, Karuver Devar, whose hymns are gathered into the Ninth Book of the Saiva devotional songs. The temple took its name Rajarajesvaram from the name of the king.

## TIRU ARUR

Tiru Arur is one of the oldest cities of Tamilnad, reputed as a capital city of the Chola emperors of the pre-Christian era. St. Appar sings in one of his songs that this city was the abode of Siva, long before other places and other legends arose. The chief legend here is the story of the sense of justice of Manuniti Chola. His young son Vidhivitanagan was riding his chariot along the main street, when a calf ran under its wheels and was killed. The aggrieved cow, mother of the calf, went and rang the palace bell of justice. Coming to know of the cause of the cow's grief, the king ruled that only the life of the offender could expiate the sin of taking the life of the calf and ran his chariot over his son. The legend goes that all people and earth and all the celestials admired the king's sense of justice. Siva Himself was so moved that He restored to life both the calf and the Prince.

The Siva temple here is a very large one, occupying an area of 33 acres. The temple tank (Kamalalayam) and the pond giving the favourite nelumbium flowers for temple worship are proverbially said to cover an area of 33 acres each. The main deity here is Tyagaraja (a manifest form of Siva), this form being one brought by Musukunda Chola, a pre-historic ruler, from the court of Indra.

The temple has been sanctified by the hymns of all the four Saiva canon singers, and the literature that has grown about the temple, in the form of *puranas* and minor poems, is vast.

Siva here took St. Sundarar for his comrade and was instrumental in uniting to him his first wife, Paravai. It was here that Sundarar sang his song, *Tiru Tondattohai*, enumerating the names of the men of God and ending that he is the servant of such men.

The temple has large towers on all the four outer walls and has also a thousand-pillared hall. The important festival of this temple is the Panguni Uttiram festival, a ten-day festival, on the last day of which the temple chariot is drawn along the four main streets around the temple, with the Lord Tyagaraja and His Consort Sakti mounted on the chariot. The chariot is gigantic in size, unequalled in the whole country and equally beautiful in construction and embellishments. "The Beauty of the Tiru Arur Chariot" is a proverbial saying.

Millions from all over the state yet throng the city to witness the procession of the car and participate in the drawing of it.

In the Saiva tradition this shrine is the prithvi shrine (earth) where Siva is of the form of the earth (here an anthill) and hence His name is Vanmikanatha.



## TIRU ANNAMALAI

Five major shrines are considered to represent the five elements as shrines to the All-pervasive Siva. They are Earth- Tiru Arur; Water-Tiru Anaikka; Fire-Tiru Annamalai; Air – Tiruk-Kalatti; and Ether (*akasa*) – Chidambaram. The legend of how Tiru-Annamalai had come to represent the element of fire has been explained under the Karttikai Dipam festival.

Tiru Annamalai is a very ancient temple, standing on 24 acres, having four large walls and gopuras and other smaller gopuras. The eastern temple tower is the tallest in Tamilnad, rising to a height of 217 feet. It has a 1000 pillared hall, a 100 pillared hall and other halls and wonderful architecture and sculptural wealth. Siva is known here as Arunachala (the red hill) and Sakti is Unnamulai. The shrine is most holy because it is held to confer salvation to one who merely contemplates on it. The Karttikai dipam festival here is the grandest. Several hundred thousand people flock to witness it from all over India and from abroad.

The devotional literature on this shrine is very vast. St. Jnana-sambandhar and Appar have sung many *Devaram* songs on this shrine. St. Manikkavacakar also has sung many *Tiruvacakam* poems on this shrine. There are two *sthala puranas*, all of which emphasize the great efficacy of circumambulating the hill (a distance of  $8\frac{1}{2}$  miles) adjacent to the temple which is situated at its foot. The hill is more than 2600 feet in height.

The hill itself is a Sivalinga and this is Arunachala. The lighting of the Dipam on the top of the hill on the Karttikai day is calculated to create in the minds of the devout public the feeling that the hill is the *Joti* that was beyond the ken of Brahma and Vishnu. Hence a *darsan* of the Joti, which can be seen for miles around for several nights and days, absolves one from all sin.

The whole drama of St. Arunagirinathar's life was enacted in Tiru Annamalai. He has sung about 85 *Tiruppuhal* verses on this shrine. Lord Muruha bestowed His Grace on Arunagirinathar from his image on a pillar which is today called Kambattu Ilayanar (the Youthful One on the pillar). Any number of realised souls had sought solace on this hill and the temple. In the modern day it is well known that Ramana Maharishi had some mystic attraction to this place even as a boy, did several penances here, stayed here the whole of his life without moving out, conferring peace of joy to numberless devotees and finally attained *samadhi* here. Many *jnanis* after Arunagiri and earlier than Ramana had taken refuge in the beacon of light in this place.

## PALANI

Palani is an important hill shrine in Madurai district dedicated to Lord Muruha. *Tiru Muruhatruppadai* of the Sangham period, written by the poet Nakkirar mentions the place as Tiru Avinankudi, one of the six camps of Muruha. This is now a separate shrine at the foot of the Palani hill forming part of the town. One of the chiefs of the Sangham period, Vel Avi ruled over this area designated then as Podini; the particle Avi in the Avinankudi denotes this ruler and the modern name Palani is corrupted from Podini.

Another legend gives an etymology for the name Palani. When the brothers Ganesa and Muruha clamoured for the mango fruit in the hand of Siva. He declared that he who went round the world first could have it. Muruha rode His peacock round the world, while Ganesa went round Siva, saying "all the worlds are contained in You" and got the fruit. Muruha was naturally disappointed; but Siva called Him, "You are the fruit" (*Palam-Ni*) and thus the name Palani stuck.

The special Muruha shrine is now situated on a small hill with well built steps. There He is known as Bala Dandayudhapani, the youthful wielder of the staff. Today this shrine is the richest shrine in Tamilnad and its surplus funds are utilised for many social welfare activities such as education and health. Muruha here is in the form of the young recluse, wearing only the loin cloth. Quite a large number of people from Kerala go here and worship him, each invariably carrying a pot of milk for *abhisheka*. Many also carry the *kavadi*. The *Kavadi* is said to represent the carrying of two hillocks named Sivagiri and Saktigiri given by Agastya to Idumban (the body-guard of Muruha). Palani hill is the Sivagiri while the Idumban hill is the Sakti hill. Bhaktas carry milk and rice etc. on the two terminal pots of the *kavadi*.

Literature on Palani is vast. St. Arunagirinathar has sung 83 songs on this Muruha besides some references in his other songs. There is a later *sthala puranam* for the shrine and a score of other minor poems and musical compositions.

His consorts are not represented here with Muruha. The image of Muruha here is said to be installed by Bhoga siddhar, out of chemicals and herbs in the distant past. The *abhisheka* water is, therefore, said to cure people of many ailments.



## TIRU CHENDUR

This is a seashore temple of Muruha in Tirunelveli district on the east coast at the southern tip of South India. This is considered one of the six camps – *padaividu* – of Muruha. Usually His temples are hill shrines, as He is held in Tamil literary tradition to be the Lord of *kurunji* the hilly region. Tiruchendur is an exception. But it used to be said that the sanctum here was originally a rock. The first of the six camps is Tiru Parankunram in Madurai and Tiruchendur is the second. This is also called *Alay-voy*, on the edge of the waves.

The temple had been raised on a coastal rock with three prakaras and two gopuras. Muruha in the sanctum is in the standing posture, east facing. The *utsavar* is Arumukha with six faces and the usual two consorts Devasena and Valli. There are several minor sub-temples, in the cave temple pattern. There are also several other minor temples outside the main temple in other parts of the city.

This was the military camp of Muruha in his campaigns against Surapadma and also the first place where he landed after the asura's destruction. Legends apart, this is the second place celebrated in *Tiru Muruhatruppada*i, 2000 years ago. The Vishnu sub-temple is of a later Pallava period (6–7 century). When the Dutch and the Portugese were pillaging the coastal area in the 17th century, the Dutch carried away the idol of Muruha and dropped it into the sea. Some time later the Chief of Tirunelveli by name Vadamalaiyappa Pillaiyan who was a pious devotee of Muruha spotted the place where the idol was lying in the sea bed, salvaged it and had a fresh consecration performed (year 1654 A.D.). This feat is celebrated in a fine *kirttanam* which is also one of the first kirttanam type musical poems in the Tamil language.

Beginning from the Sangham period, all literature celebrates the shrine. St. Appar mentions it. It was here that Muruha cured Kumaragurupara of his dumbness and gave him the gift of poesy. Saint Arunagirinathar has sung immuerable songs on Muruha here. Tiruchendur Kandar Kalivenba sung by Gurupara on the occasion is a long poem, popular among people at all levels. Other devotional songs exist in a large number. In the modern day this is one of the favourite shrines of pilgrimage, the pictures give coastal setting adding to the holiness of the shrine. The temple is one of the more affluent ones in Tamil nad. There is a golden chariot in the temple for the *ula* of Muruha along the *prakaras* during festivals. Eminent sannyanis had performed the building and renovation work of the temple from the middle of the 19th century.

## SRI RANGAM

The most important shrine of Vishnu for all the Vaishnavas. *Koil* in their tradition simply means Sri Rangam. In the Tamil language, it is known as Tiru Arangam. *Arangam* means the land in the middle of a river. Sri Rangam is a large stretch of land lying between the Kaveri and its branch Kollidam; the two separate west of Sri Rangam and meet again to its east. It is an island amidst the river, containing besides this shrine the Tiru Anaikka Siva temple, Tiruppatrurai Siva temple and some others. The Vishnu temple is presided over by Lord Ranganatha. The shrine has been sanctified by the songs of all the Alvar (except Madura kavi). Tondar adippodi Alvar proclaims that the Kaveri is more holy than even the Ganges because it houses Sri Rangam while the Ganges does not.

Legends say that Ranganatha was taken to Lanka by Vibhishana but on the way He decided to stay here and so Vibhishana installed Him here and performed many festivals for Him. Successive monarches of Chola, Pandiya, Pallava, Hoysala and Vijayanagar dynasties have built various parts of the shrine and the city. The temple has seven *prakaras* and seven concentric streets and each has a history of its own. The *vimana* of the sanctum is called the *Pranavakara vimana*.

Sri Ranganatha in the sanctum is of large size, reclining on the Adishesha *sayanam* (couch) with His head on the west and south facing. Every part of the temple is sanctified in legend and history. The shrine possesses some of the most ancient pieces of jewellery and ornaments.

Kulasekharar and Tirumangai Alvar had made great contributions to the temple structure.

Tiruppaanalvar, Tondaradippodi and Andal attained beauty here. Many acharyas were born here and lived here propagating their doctrines and expounding the *Nalayiram* and the Vaishnava philosophy.

The temple and its main streets occupy an extent of 160 acres. The temple walls together have a total length of six miles. *Svargavasal* on the Vaikuntha ekadasi day is the most important festival day. But in fact every day is a festival day for the temple. The temple had been ransacked and pillaged by Muhammedan invaders, Later the Vijayanagar rulers and others had rebuilt the demolished parts. The history of Sri Rangam is in fact the history of Vaishnavism. It was the seat of Ramanuja.



## TIRUPPATI

Known as Tirumalai, Tiruppati was a Tamil place as its name indicates; it was a small town in the Chittor district of the composite Madras state but when the Andhra Pradesh was formed in 1953 as a separate state it has gone over to that state. Called Tiru-Venkatam in all Tamil literature from the ancient period, it was always mentioned as the northern boundary of the Tamilnadu.

Tiruppati temple is situated at the base of seven peaks in a kind of valley surrounded by hills. Hence it is called Saptagiri and is familiar throughout Tamilnad as Elumalai. Vishnu enshrined there is Venkatachalapati also called Srinivasaperumal. To the north Indians He is Balaji. To reach the shrine one had to go up and down seven hills on which steps had been carved - quite a long distance-and it was indeed an ordeal before the introduction of the modern bus service. There is no shrine here for Sakti (Lakshmi). But Tiruchchanur, at a distance of three miles from the town, holds a shrine of Lakshmi in the name of Padmavati devi, Consort of Venkatesa.

The temple was at the height of its glory under the Vijayanagar rulers but saw bad days when the Muhammedan rulers held sway over the area. The East India company which later took charge, handed over the temple administration to the Mahant in 1843.

The *Vimana* over the sanctum is a fine one, called *Ananda Nilaya Vimana*. The figures on the top of the Vishnu temples usually are figures of Garuda. Here they are the simha (lion) and from this and from other features, scholars would say that this should have been originally a Sakti shrine.

When Anantalvan was digging the temple tank with his pregnant wife, Vishnu went to the help of the lady in the guise of a boy. Enraged that another had come to share the merit accruing from the noble art of tank-digging, Anantalvan struck at the boy with his spade. It wounded him in the chin. This wound is still carried by the image of the Lord in the sanctum to which medicated camphor is applied as medicine. This camphor is one of the important temple *prasadams* today.

The Tiruppati shrine is the richest in all India. Its annual income is in several millions of rupees. With the funds the temple is conducting many institutions like the Venkatesvara University, other educational institutions and hospitals.

Govindaraja temple is an important adjunct of the larger shrine.

## BANARAS (KASI)

Kasi, the holy of holies for the Hindus all over the world, is situated on the banks of the Ganges in the Uttar Pradesh. The city lies between the confluences of the two rivers Varuna and Asi with the Ganges and so is called *Varanasi* (Banaras). Ganges is the first of the seven holy rivers which can give salvation to mankind. Two other rivers, Yamuna and Sarasvati (which is now unseen) have a confluence with the Ganges at Prayag (modern Allahabad.).

The importance of Banaras is from the fact that Siva enshrined here as Visvanatha is the concept of the Universal lingas, the Visvalinga. Hence His importance to all Hinduism. A remarkable feature here is that any Hindu can perform an *abhisheka* and puja to the Linga, himself without an intermediary in the form of a priest. Hundreds of thousands of people daily derive the greatest joy and solace in bathing the Lord in the Ganges with water and milk, and in offering their own choice of flowers, fruits and sweets. This unique accessibility to the Presence is hardly met with in any other shrine. Hindu people throng to this place not only from all parts of India but from all corners of the globe.

Aurangzebe had demolished the ancient Visvanatha temple here and built a mosque on the site.

The consort of Visvanatha is known as Visalakshi. But the aspect of Sakthi, as *Annapurni*, the universal Mother, is more important here. She is featured with a cup of milk rice on one hand and a ladle on the other with which she is doling out food to Siva, symbolic of the satisfying of the universal hunger.

Kasi was having a glorious continuity of religious history from the earliest periods of known history. Sages like Vyasa, Mahavira, Sankara, and Tulasidas had enriched the life in Kasi. It was in the days of the persecutor, Aurangzebe, that St. Kumara gurupara went to the city and by the force of his personality, erudition and mastery of Hindustani obtained vast concessions from the Muslim deputy there and established his Saiva monastery. This is still a great landmark there. The Kedarnath temple in Banaras re-constructed by this swami, is a replica of the Tamilnad temple indicating the architecture and ritual pattern of Tamilnad.

Many people who could afford go to Banaras with the idea of breathing their last there as death in Kasi is considered to confer mukti. The legend is that Sakti Herself fans them in their last moments and directs their soul to Kailas.



## TEMPLES IN SRI LANKA

The Tamils of Sri Lanka had always been Saivas and they hold two Siva temples and one Muruha temple in Sri Lanka as most important. *Tiruk-kedisvaram* is a shrine in the place called Matottam on the banks of the River Palavi on the north west of Sri Lanka. The temple goes back to a period of pre-history. The shrine has been sanctified in the *Devaram* songs of Saints Tiru Jnanasambandhar and Sundara murti. *Periyapuranam* says that Sambandhar worshipped at Ramesvaram on the southern tip of Tamilnad and from there he worshipped mentally the two shrines of Kedisvaram and Tiruk-Konamalai and sang his *devaram* songs on the Lord enshrined there. He mentions Matottam also in his songs. St. Sundarar in his song on this place mentions the place and the river.

The Portuguese the most cruel marauders among all the western trades who came east, razed the temple to the ground. Its very site could not be known for a long time. This was ascertained in 1894 and a new temple built and consecrated in 1903.

*Tiruk-konamalai* (Trincomalee) is the other temple situated on the north eastern corner of Sri Lanka (konam-corner). This shrine is also known as the Dakshina (southern) Kailas. Jagarajasekhara, prince of Ceylon, caused Pandita raja to write a *purana* for this shrine. It has also two other puranas written later. The place has a natural harbour in use even today. It has also an important Kali temple. Pandiyan relics are noticed here. Festivals conducted here are famous.

These two shrines are places of pilgrimage for the Saivas of Tamil nad because of the songs sung on them by the Nayanmar. Kirimalai has a Siva temple known as Nakulesvaram, which is also an ancient shrine. St. Arunagirinathar has celebrated in his *Tiruppuhal* the Tiru Konamalai and also this shrine which he calls Arukkonaamalai.

*Kadigamam* is a Muruha shrine in Sri Lanka. It dates back to the centuries B.C. Muruha is worshipped here in the form of a *joti*. A *yantra* in a casket is preserved in the sanctum. The local stream is Manikka ganga. The temple priest ties up his mouth with a piece of cloth and performs his silent puja. There are many important festivals. The temple is administered by the Government department. St. Arunagirinathar has sung here 25 *Tiruppuhal* songs.

## SECTION 5

# FESTIVALS



## FESTIVALS—INTRODUCTION

The Tamils have a glorious and continuous heritage of classical literature and culture which goes back to a period two thousand and five hundred years. They are reputed the world over as great temple builders. And what are temples if not seats of festivals? Classical Tamil Literature is said to be of three divisions, *Iyal*, *Isai*, and *Natakam* – poetry, music and dance. Music and dance are accompaniments to any celebration of festivals. They are even prescribed as symbols of honour in temple worship and festivals - *gita*, *vadya*, *nirutta* – music, vocal and instrumental, and dance, out of a total of sixteen such symbols of honour.

Festivals are fountains of joy for all. They exist in all countries, in all levels of society, in all races, and had been existing through all the ages. If man has been described as a social animal, festivals are the occasions for a close joyous coming together for the members of the social group, and they give full expression to the social instinct.

The festivals seem to constitute in a sense the eternal religion of India, particularly Tamilnad. We need not know when the celebration of festivals by society or the State started. Saint Tiru Jnanasambandar mentions a series of monthly festivals for the twelve months which were popular in his day (the seventh century). Most of them continue to this day almost unchanged, both in the manner of celebration and in their significance. Festivals are the outward social expression of the communal joy of the people and they have helped to retain the best in the past culture and, by the celebrations in the present, hand it down to the future generations. Festivals, mostly conservative, do not lend themselves easily to changes but continue to be rigid and the very rigidity opens up as it were a window for us to have a peep into the past.

Mode of observance of festivals has not changed. Lamp, incense, camphor, fragrant flowers, sandal, turmeric and kumkum with the ever present betels, plantain fruits and coconuts are there, both in the domestic festivals and in the temple festivals. Instead of the ancient oil lamps we may have electric lamps, but yet the oil lamp is there if not in the centre, at least in a corner symbolically. Camphor might have been introduced into our country somewhere about the 4th century A.D. in the place of an oil lamp for waving before the deity (*aradana*). But the others are unchangeable and irreplaceable. The kolam and festoons are part of the decorations for any festivals. Baths, a personal discipline of

fasting, vigil in some cases, bath in the rivers or the sea, circum-ambulation, tying of the piece of yellow string round the neck or the wrist, new clothes in some cases, and the particular food offerings which are special for each occasion – all together have kept up further a continuity of the ancient culture and have helped to keep alive the glow and glamour through many centuries, even amidst the greatest gloom and darkness caused by foreign aggression and suppression.

The average Tamilian, as indeed the average Indian, has a worshipful attitude towards the Supreme Intelligence, as manifest in the five elements - earth, water, fire, air and ether- the Sun and the Moon, and the Individual. (The eight are called in Saivism the *Ashta murta* or the eight manifest forms of Siva. Hence his attitude of reverence to all things – say, to the sea, the river, the plant, and the animal. The sensible person does not worship minor evil devatas; he pays homage no doubt to departed ancestors out of a sense of respect and gratitude. All these elements are manifest in the various festivals. Rivers are worshipped as sacred waters, the sun is worshipped as the giver of all life and bounty, and plants are worshipped as *sthala vriksha* (sacred trees attached to shrines) and ancestors are given due homage. All these call for an expression of piety and devotion in worship, fasting, vigils, offerings of food and flowers, and gifts to men of God and the sharing of food with the labourers and the poor, and a deep fellow feeling with all creation. Festivals, by their very nature, are thus sources of great rejoicing for all concerned.

Apart from daily worship, the worship during the annual festivals in the more important temples attracts several hundred thousand people from all over the Tamilnad. Here all the people, young and old, men and women, are emotionally united in the worship. Cast, class and even creed are subordinated in the one thought of the *darsan* before them and everyone is besides himself in a religious transportation of joy and wonder. 'I' and 'Mine' are forgotten at least for the moment of the puja. In this sense, the unifying value of congregational worship cannot be over-emphasized.

A dozen festivals are noted upon in the next few pages. Many of them are social festivals while a few are religious, both Saiva and Vaishnava. In Tamilnad, home celebrations and temple celebrations do not make any great difference and both the types are greatly enjoyable social festivals.



## ADIP-PERUKKU

The Adip-perukku is a great folk festival concerned with the river Kaveri. It is celebrated on the particular day, the 18th of Adi and is not associated with any star or phase of the moon (*nakshatra* or *tithi*). It is not mentioned in any purana. But it is the most popular one and perhaps is equalled only by the *Pongal* festival. The Adi festival is a worship and a welcoming felicitation to the waters that begin to flow in and start the cultivation season: the *Pongal* festival is a thanks-offering to the Sun God who had made all the cultivation possible and had given the people a bounteous harvest. The first follows the *Dakshinayana* day while the second is actually on the *Uttarayana* day.

In the rural communities of a few decades ago and perhaps even today, Adip-perukku is a day of great fun to the newly weds. The *tirumangalya* is generally tied in a piece of yellow string round the neck of the bride by the bridegroom during the function. The actual wedding would have taken place in the month of Vaikasi or Ani. So the Adi 18th is utilised by the bride's people to invite the bridegroom to their place in order that he may replace the cotton thread with a golden chain. The month of Adi is not considered auspicious for conception for the newly wedded bride because in that case child birth may be in Chitrai a very hot month which every one would like to avoid and so, during the whole month of Adi, she is detained in her mother's house. On this day however, he is invited here and the two go together to the river along with other people of the village and of their own household, and there he transfers the *tirumangalya* to the gold chain and consigns the old thread to the Kaveri.

By about 7-8 a.m. all people set out for the river at an auspicious moment. Whole communities and whole villages turn out. Women carry raw rice, jaggery (or molasses) and sugar, coconut and plantain fruits, red coloured olai (palmyrah leaf done as an ear ornament), special black bangles, thread, lamps, flowers and sandal, turmeric, camphor and other puja materials. *Olai* is the name of the ear-ring even today. Girl children of course accompany their elders.

Boys have great mirth making on this day. They prepare a small toy cart in wood with four wheels, something on the model of a temple car. They decorate it with tender white coconut leaf shoots done into ornamental designs interspersed with green mango leaves. The construction of the car gives scope for their creative and artistic activity. Groups of boys draw several such chariots

from their houses to the water front of the river which may be a furlong away or in some cases even a mile away. The rice pots and other offerings like flowers are placed in the toy cart and the boys draw them to the front.

As soon as everyone is assembled, all of them have a bath and then there is the puja. Kaveri as the representative of the great Mother, the giver of all bounty, is invoked on a handful of sand placed on a decorated pedestal kept facing east, lamps are lit, (it is a great feat to light the lamp and keep it burning till the end of the puja, because of the strong winds blowing on the open water front) and the rice soaked in water is mixed with sugar and coconut chips and some pulses and is offered as food offering along with the banana fruits. The cotton thread is soaked in turmeric and sandal paste and placed on the invoked Kaveri. Simultaneously, the floral *archana* is made to the running water, the real Kaveri; the *olai* and bangles (called *kadolai karahamani*) are placed in the stream in token of Kaveri's wearing them, a piece of the thread is also offered, flowers also offered and lighted camphor waved. Then girl children play several games of kummi to their heart's content in front of the real Kaveri, on the sands or on the bank of the river. Boys also play games like *chadugudu* (modern *kabaddi*) on the banks. Pieces of the thread are then worn round the neck by all the *sumangalis* and little girls, and by all the boys and men round the wrist. The treacle-mixed rice is then distributed to all present and they then return home to partake of a sumptuous *chitranna* lunch.

A *chitrannam* (dishes of rice food) with more than half a dozen varieties are prepared in the house and, on return from the river, all the people have a feast which is naturally a welcome change from the routine.

The Kaveri is as old as the Tamil language. We have the legend that Kaveri was being brought up as the daughter of the royal sage, Kabera, and hence the name Kaveri. She had entered the *kamandala* (hand-pot) of Sage Agastya and at the prayers of the people Ganesa took the form of crow and tilted the pot, on which the water flowed out from it into a stream which came to be called by her name as Kaveri. The Kaveri flowed through the Chola country making paddy fields yield abundantly and verdant woods bloom in profusion and hence her name, Ka-viri. She is hailed as the patron saint and the queen of the Chola monarchs. All Tamil poetry from the earliest period celebrates her glory.



## VINAYAKA CHATURTHI

Ganesa (Vinayaka) is the most popular deity in the whole of South India. Even the smallest hamlet has a temple for him. The moment a new township is formed, the residents put up a small temple for Vinayaka and call it *Pillayar koil*; *Pillai* here means the son of Siva; he is the Elder Son and so is known in literature as the *Mootha-pillaiyar*; Subrahmanya (called also as Muruha in the South and Kartik in the North) is the Younger Son.

Vinayaka means one who has no superior; Ganesa and also Ganapati mean the leader of Siva's forces: these terms refer to the same god, the elephant-headed son of Siva. These are puranic thoughts no doubt; but in the philosophical conception, Ganesa is just one of the twentyfive forms (Sivamurtas) in which Siva the formless and unmanifest Being, manifested Himself to the devas and the mortals on earth. He is Vignesvara, the Lord who helps as to overcome all obstacles in their lives and efforts.

The Ganesa puja is done on the fourth day, *chaturthi*, in the bright fortnight of the Tamil month of Avani (August-September). The worship or puja is done as usual towards the close of the forenoon. The whole house and the entrance are decorated with *kolam*. Festoons are hung round the place of worship making it into a sort of decorated *mandapam* or hall. Tender coconut leaves split and artistically designed, white in colour, mango leaves, dark green, and lillies in white, pink and crimson festoons, present a colourful appearance. A newly made clay image is placed facing east in a convenient place in the northern part of the house, on a pedestal decorated in *kolam* with an eight-petalled *padma* (lotus flower). On the *padma*, a small quantity of paddy or rice is spread and the Ganesa image is placed on it, over a plantain leaf. Only white flowers are used for the worship. *Aruhu* and the abnoxious *erukku* are special favourites. Then all the puja rituals are gone through fully.

Besides, the fruits of the season such as the wood apple (*vila*) and jambu (*naval*) are also offered in plenty along with the customary plantain fruits and coconuts. Naturally such profusion of eatables whets the appetite of the boys who utilise all their creative and artistic talents in making the Ganesa image. After the pujas are over the boys are given a sumptuous feast of these articles in the noon, in the evening and in the night also. Usually in the rural parts, a puja is performed again the next morning or noon (*punar puja*) with fresh food offerings. In the evening, the Ganesa image is carried by the boys along with the flowers and consigned

to a running stream and, where it is not available, to a good water pool or tank. So Ganesa who was shaped out of the earth is now returned to the same earth.

The very manner of invocation (*avahana*) of Ganesa for puja anywhere is symbolic of the deepest Hindu philosophy. He is given a complete image and invoked thereon during the Vinayaka Chaturthi puja. But in the matter of the many other occasions of worship, he is invoked on any material - a pinch of sand, of sandal, of turmeric, or even of cowdung; the material does not matter. The whole conception of Vinayaka is in the mind of the worshipper. He brings out the ideal of God from within his heart and makes Him abide in the material before him.

All the celestial beings are said to have worshipped Vignesvara, the remover of obstacles. Vishnu worshipped Him before he subdued Mahabali, Sakti worshipped Him before marching on Mahishasura, Adi Sesha, before holding the earth on his hood, and Rama, before commencing the *Setubandhana* and so on.

There was once an elephant-headed demon who was a terror to the celestials. At their request Siva caused Ganesa to take shape with an elephant head and also caused the demon to be slain by Ganesa. The demon had asked all devas to perform *toppu-karanam*, a humiliating form of showing obeisance before him. (*Toppu-karanam* is the act of holding one's ears by the hands and sitting and rising up alternately, rather a difficult form of exercise.) When he was killed by Ganesa, the same form of obeisance came to be shown to Ganesa to obtain His grace.

The legend of Ganesa cirumambulating Siva and Sakti for getting a mango fruit from Him is well known. Once in Kailas, Siva was holding in his hand a mango fruit given by sage Narada. Ganesa and Muruha both clamoured for the fruit. Narada had said that the fruit was not to be cut but to be eaten whole. So Siva declared that it would be given to him who went round the earth first. Immediately Muruha mounted his peacock and flew round the earth. But Ganesa, with his great intelligence, simply went round Siva and Parvati thrice and claimed the fruit saying that, as Siva and Sakti were immanent in all things in the universe, going round them was equivalent to going round the universe.

Another legend says that Vinayaka was commissioned to write the Mahabharata on the northern Meru hill and, when his stylus broke in the speed of his writing, he broke his right tusk and continued his writing with the broken piece. Literature in praise of Ganesa is vast both in Sanskrit and in Tamil.



## SARASVATI PUJA

This is the most important All-India festival celebrated with great pomp and rejoicing throughout India. When Indian rulers ruled over some of the states like Mysore, it was a magnificent State festival. The Sarasvati puja is the last day of the culmination of puja which is being performed for nine days and so it is also called *Navaratri* (nine nights). Nine days are set apart for the puja because probably the number nine was considered a mystic number. Any addition or multiplication leaves it undisturbed; all the other numbers are held to be contained in it. So also is Sakti, who contains all the universe in Her and is undisturbed by anything external.

The festival is celebrated on the nine days following the New Moon day of the month of Asvina (in Tamil usually Purattasi, September-October) and culminates on the ninth day, called the *Maha navami* (Maha-great). The tenth day called the *Maha dasami* is also included in the celebrations and there it is called the *Dasarah* (ten nights) festival. The great importance of the festival has earned for it the title the *Maha* (or *mahar*) *nonbu*. It was being celebrated in the village schools in the past for many days after the puja with a grand display of many intricate patterns of *kolattam*.

The Sarasvati puja in common knowledge is the day dedicated to the worship of books. Till the dawn of the century, people used only palm-leaf books. So this day was set apart for taking out old palm-leaf books, cleaning them, oiling them with a special oil to which an insecticide was added, and piling them up artistically for the day's puja and worship.

A new piece of string soaked in turmeric and sandal is passed over the pile of books, in token of ornaments offered to Sarasvati. Lighted *kuttuvilakkus* are placed on either side and the puja offered as usual. The whole house is decorated with colourful and artistically plaited festoons of tender coconut leaves and mango leaves; paper decoration is not used. The floor is decorated with *kolam* over the entire house. Books etc. are placed on a wooden pedestal. Cooked rice with ghee, coconut, sugar and bananas, along with betels are offered at noon.

As usual, the food offerings offered to Sarasvati on five, seven or nine plantain leaves, are generally distributed after the puja is over to working class dependents of the village. *Vadai* and *paya-sam* are there for the children. *Devi sahasranama* would say that *payasam* is a favourite of Hers. A *sundal* offering (boiled pulses) is made in the evening and this is distributed to the village children

and others who assemble, on all the nine days. There is quite a good amount of singing in praise of Sakti by the children and also by all the women folk.

Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, is always conceived of in spotless white. Knowledge or jnana is Light and so She is portrayed as pure white; Her dress is white, Her ornaments are the pearl and the white crystal gems; She is seated on a white lotus. On Her hands are the crystal white rosary, the book and the vina. White is also the colour of purity.

Sarasvati is the Muse of Learning and of Arts in Indian mythology. Hence the worship of the tools for art making is worship of Sarasvati Herself. The tools for crafts are worshipped on this day by all people, not only the artisans. Even in the houses of well-to-do people the instruments used for playing the various trades and crafts are placed alongside Sarasvati, alongside the books and palm-leaf manuscripts, and worship is done to all the articles so placed. No picture of Sarasvati is used for the puja. She is considered to abide in the books and the tools. Musical instruments, household tools, agricultural implements and all similar tools and instruments are cleaned, iron materials oiled, and placed in worship.

Then they are all marked with sandal, turmeric and kumkum, placed by the side of the books on either side arranged in an artistic manner and the entire set up constitutes the image of Sarasvati. A grand conception indeed, without any picture or actual image of Sarasvati in sand or in sandal. The sandal-turmeric-soaked piece of string is passed over the entire group serving as the decking of the deity with jewels and ornaments.

The tenth day, the day after Sarasvati puja day, is equally important. It is called the Vijaya Dasami, the day of Victory. It was on this day that Sakti as Durga secured a victory over the forces of ignorance, symbolically portrayed as the Mahishasura, the buffalo-headed demon. This is therefore considered auspicious for education, and so children are sent to the school for commencing the alphabets, on this day. It had been the practice in the past to give presents of rice and clothes to the school teacher, besides presenting slates and pencils to the poor children of the school.

Important temples celebrate the day in the evening with a festival in which Durga is taken out in procession to shoot down the Demon of Ignorance.



## DIPAVALI

Dipavali is probably the greatest national festival of India, celebrated with much rejoicing by people at all levels, from the Himalayas to Cape Kumari. It is also one of the most important events in the calendar in Tamilnad. People of all classes look forward to this day for a period of happiness and satisfaction. The newly wedded couple are invited to the house of the parents of the bride and there they celebrate their first dipavali after the wedding with great rejoicing. The bridegroom is the recipient of many presents besides clothing, some given freely and some others in the modern day probably under pressure, a sort of *Vara-dakshina* in the cloak of voluntary presents. Boys look forward to many days and nights of firing crackers and little girls look forward to colourful bangles and ribbons. Servants and dependents are waiting eagerly for their annual presents of clothing. Every one looks forward to a sumptuous supply of sweets.

Dipavali occurs on the night of the 14th day of the dark fortnight called *chatur-dasi*, the Tamil month of *Aippasi* (October-November); the next day is the new moon day, *amavasya*; the bath is prescribed for the *chatur-dasi*.

Unlike other festivals, this one is attended with many important parts. One is the oil bath prescribed for all the people of the house to be done in the early hours of the morning, before the day dawns. The second is the wearing of new clothes by all the people of the household as soon as the bath is over. The third is the preparation and eating of many varieties of sweets and other eatables in the house. The years have added a fourth element in the form of crackers for the younger people which they begin to fire from not only the previous night but during several nights earlier and continue even for a few nights later. Pre-dawn oil bath is considered to confer the merits of a bath in the Ganges and it is called *Ganga snanam*.

As soon as the bath is over, the lady of the house lights a lamp, invokes Vishnu as Lakshmi Narayana on it, places all the articles of clothing purchased, before the lamp in token of dedication, offers all the sweets and other articles of food to the deity, and then everybody puts on the new clothes and sits down for a sumptuous breakfast.

The younger members of the family who put on new clothes prostrate before the elders and receive their blessings before they sit at the table for breakfast. Breakfast is generally taken in orthodox households even before daybreak. It consists of the usual items

like *idli* and on this festival occasion, there is in addition half a dozen varieties of sweets and the same number of savoury items, depending on the purse of the family. It is a matter of prestige for every rural household to make its own eatables for the feast.

Dipavali occurs once a year and it is an occasion for all round joy. Hence all people make many varieties of the sweets ungrudgingly for the sake of their children.

Crackers are a source of joy to the children. They give themselves up to enjoyment of crackers and fire works for about ten days irrespective of the drain it makes on the purse of their parents.

This day is also known as Naraka chaturdasi day in memory of an asura (demon) king named Narakasura and, as is usual with every great festival, this one also has an old legend connected with him. He was endowed with great powers, which he used to harass all beings, human and celestial. So the celestials prayed to Lord Vishnu to rid them of the menace of Narakasura. The Lord thereupon came on the earth, with Satyabhama as his charioteer and slew him on this day, at this hour, the pre-dawn hour. His dying prayer was that one who observed the day with bath, feast and fireworks should go to heaven. It was granted and hence people celebrate the day at this hour in this festive manner. It is accordingly called the *Narak-chaturdasi snanam*.

Dipavali is not mentioned anywhere in the inscriptions of Tamilnad. Only from the 15-16th centuries do we have definite references to it. We have historical evidence to show that the dipavali oil bath and fire-works date back only from the Vijayanagar period. But though these might have been earlier, there is no evidence.

The celebration of Dipavali by the Tamil people has a great significance of national integration. Lord Krishna from Dwaraka, in the western seas, went all the way to Prakjotishapuram in North East Assam to slay the demon Narakasura, who was harassing the people. The occasion is celebrated as one of the greatest annual festivals in the extreme South of India today. No other cultural festival of India exhibits this measure of the unity of the Nation.

The Dipavali, an occasion of Light and Joy, is not to be merely an outward celebration; it should penetrate inward and help to light up man from darkness to light, from self-imposed misery to a new hope and joy, from evil to good and from attachment to the fleeting to a love of the Eternal in spirit.



## SKANDA SHASHTI

The Hindu religion, in a wider sense, is a religion without bigotry. Although it believes in one God, who is the Supreme, it believes that that Being manifests Itself in various forms as Ganesa, Muruha, Siva, Sakti and Vishnu. To an outsider who has not understood the deeper significance of this religion, it may appear to be poly-theistic i.e. a sort of heathen worship of many gods. But this is not correct. God had appeared in various forms to bestow His Grace on the mortals, to suit their own nature and the circumstances. Bhaktas had realised God in different forms and hence these different forms. But essentially He is one without an equal or any superior. The five manifestations listed above are worshipped in different ways on different occasions. As Ganesa, the elephant-headed son of Siva, He is worshipped on the day of the Ganesa Chaturthi. As Sakti, He is worshipped in the female form on the Adip-puram, the Navaratri, the Sarasvati puja, the Varalakshmi puja and other days. As Vishnu, he is worshipped as Rama and Krishna on their dates of birth (the *jayanti* days), and on days like the *Vaikuntha Ekadasi*. As Siva he is worshipped on days like the Ardra Darsana, Maha Sivaratri and similar days. As Surya, the manifest sun-god, He is worshipped on the Pongal day, the Ratha Saptami etc. As Muruha, He is worshipped on the Skanda Shashti days, besides Karttikai. All these festive days have equal importance, none being more important and none less.

In Tamil literary tradition, Muruha is the Lord of the hills; when the land was conceived of as the five types of physio-graphical regions and separate literary conventions rose to portray the life in the five regions, love in the hills was depicted as union of the lovers and He was hailed as the Lord abiding in all the hilly regions. Popular legends depicting Muruha as courting Valli, the daughter of the hill chief, would have made him the Lord of the Hills. He is known always as Subrahmanya, the Supreme Brahman. Though portrayed in the puranas as the son of Siva, He is indeed identical with Siva and not different from Him.

He is called here the Skanda. Six divine sparks emanated from the six central eyes of Siva; they fell into the Saravana tank in Kailas; Parvati took the sparks and joined them together, and Skanda was born, with six faces. He is known throughout North India as Karttik, the Divine child who was nurtured by the six celestial nymphs of the star *Karttika*. Karttik there is always a bachelor.

Skanda Shashti is the festival in honour of Skanda celebrated in all the Siva and Skanda temples throughout Tamilnad. It occurs on the sixth day (*shashti*) of the bright fortnight after new moon in the Tamil month of Aippasi (October-November). Devotees of Muruha all over Tamilnad fast for the six days and spend the days in singing His praises, in reading poems and puranas depicting His glory, and in worshipping Him in the local temple or in other famous shrines.

In important temples there is a car festival, where an image of Muruha is drawn in the temple car along the main streets and on the evening of the sixth day, there is the culmination of the six-day festival. He receives the spear (*jnana sakti*) from the hands of Parvati, the Sakti of Siva, and with the spear slays Surapadma, the personification of ignorance and ego, the demon who had been harassing the celestials. Allegorically, this signifies the truth that the soul receives the supreme *jnana* (wisdom) from Siva's Grace (Sakti) and with this *jnana* is able to overcome ignorance (*ajnana*) and then reach final union with God.

In the twenty centuries of Tamil literary history there is almost no poet who has not sung of Muruha. Foremost among his singers is the famous Arunagirinatha who has sung about 1360 songs of his famous Tiruppuhazh on Muruha, besides other smaller poems.

Muruha is always young, Balasubramanya, like Balakrishna, the symbol of redolent lustrous childhood and youth. Youth is always impetuous and once, Muruha placed Brahma, the Creator himself, in prison for not understanding the significance of the primordial sound *Pranava*, *OM*. At the intercession of Siva, who heard from Muruha the meaning of OM and was satisfied, Brahma was later restored to his duty of creations.

All the hills beginning from Tiruchendur in the farthest south upto Tiruvenkatam in the north are traditionally His shrines.

All the Siva temples celebrate the Skanda Shashti festival. But that at Sikkil, an important Siva shrine near Nagappattinam in Tanjavur district has some miraculous elements woven into its celebration even in the modern day.



## KARTTIKAI DIPAM

The Karttikai dipam festival in the month of Karttikai (November – December) is one which is observed throughout Tamilnad in every home and in every temple. This occurs on the day when the moon is in conjunction with the constellation Karttikai (Pleiades) and purnima (full moon),. This constellation appears as a group of six stars in the firmament in the shape of a pendant from the ear. These are considered in Indian mythology as the six celestial nymphs who reared the six babies in the Saravana tank which later were joined together to form the six-faced Muruha. He is consequently called *Karttikeya*, the one brought up by the Karttika nymphs.

The festival has its origin in the Lingotbhava legend of Tiruvannamalai. In ages gone by, Brahma, the Creator, and Vishnu, the Preserver, disputed between themselves as to who was greater and who was Supreme. This dispute was a prolonged one and so Lord Siva decided to teach them the Truth. He appeared before them in the form of a huge column of fire, an Effulgent Light. When the two saw It, they referred their quarrel to Him. He told them that he who could discover the crown of the Light or Its foot first might be considered the superior. Accordingly Brahma took the form of a swan and flew up in an attempt to find the crown of the Light, while Vishnu took the form of a boar (*varaha*) and began to dig down to find the foot of the Light. Neither succeeded. The knowledge dawned upon them that the Light was superior to both of them. This is the significance of Annamalai. The Karttikai festival is celebrated to bring out this great truth that the Supreme God is far beyond the ken of the Creator and the Preserver. Brahma and Vishnu thereupon prayed to the column of Light, Siva, to be ever present in that place in the form of a linga. Siva agreed. The whole hill of Tiru Annamalai (Arunachala) is that linga.

This legend of Siva appearing before Brahma and Vishnu as a column of light is today celebrated not only in that place but in all the Siva temples in Tamilnadu on the Karttikai day. The appearance of the Light is believed to have taken place on this day. It is celebrated everywhere as the *dipam* festival (*dipam-lamp*). A column of fire is created in front of each temple and the *utsava murti* of the local shrine is taken out in procession. He gives a *darsan* to His devotees after the fire is lit. Generally this takes place immediately after dusk. People fast for the whole day and take their food only after this *Joti darsan*.

In memory of this Light, the whole temple is illuminated with thousands of lamps, large and small, and every home also is illuminated in the evening with hundreds of lamps shedding their twinkling light throughout the darkness of the whole night. A special offering is made to Siva on this day, consisting of fried or puffed rice mixed with treacle.

The lighting of a large number of lamps, both in the temples and in the devotees' homes on the karttikai day has been a very ancient ritual. Saint Jnanasambāndhar refers to this in one of his songs. In the moving song sung by him at Mayilappur in order to bring back to life the young maid, Pumpavai, from her ashes, he addresses her and asks her in each verse: "Will you go away from this world without witnessing this festival?" The first verse refers to the general feeding of Sivaganas as a festival ritual. The second refers to an Onam festival in the month of Aippasi. The third verse speaks of the Karttikai festival. He asks: "Wilt thou go away, Pumpavai, without witnessing the festival of lamps lighted by young damsels on the ancient Karttikai day, sacred to the Lord of Kapalisvaram (the Mayilappur temple)?"

The festival of lights which was celebrated on the *dipavali* day in the past is now celebrated on this day, the *Karttikai* day. The lighting of lamps also gives scope for fireworks among the children. Children in the rural parts make elaborate preparations some days ahead. They collect the spathes of flowers from male palmyrah trees, burn them and reduce them to a coarse powder. This they tie up into a bag in a piece of cloth and insert it in the stiff fork of any handy stick from the common physic-nut plant. After night fall on the Karttikai day, they tie up the two ends of the fork to a long loop of string, open the charcoal powder slightly and insert a piece of charcoal cinder into the powder and rotate it over the head by holding the ends of the string together. The ignited powder falls all around evenly as bright sparks, weaving different patterns according to the rotation made by the boy. The whole street and the whole village present for a few hours the spectacle of innumerable stars revolving round and round. This is a fine pastime for the children bringing forth a lot of ingenuity and mirth; it is a creative activity and sport combined. When the whole thing is burnt down, the children enter the home to have a sumptuous repast of puffed rice and pulses with treacle.



## ARDRA DARSANA

The greatest temple festival for all the Saivas is the Dance of Lord Nataraja in Chidambaram on the Ardra day in the Tamil month of Marhali (December-January). The asterism *ardra* (*orionis*) is in the north eastern corner of the constellation of Orion. The ardra day usually occurs in conjunction with the full moon of this month. In popular parlance, the festival is called the Marhali-Tiruvadirai (Adirai is the Tamil form of Ardra). Even today, thousands of devotees throng the city from all over India, from distant overseas countries like Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore etc., braving all hardships in food and transport and the political ordeals of passport and visa to witness the dance of Nataraja here. There must be something vitally appealing to people at all levels for them to be attracted as if by a mystic magnet to this place in this day. The mystic magnet is Nataraja, the King of Dance, the Cosmic Dancer.

The Ardra darsana is a ten day festival. Ten days earlier, on the first day, there is a flag hoisting in the temple. Every day there is a festival culminating on the ninth when Nataraja, the presiding deity in the temple, is taken out in procession along the four main streets of the city in a gaily and artistically but traditionally decorated car. The car is drawn by thousands of devotees and finally brought to its original place in the evening. In recent years streets had been metalled and later macadamized, and it is no doubt easy today for a few hundred people to draw the car. But it was not so easy six decades ago when the streets were all mud roads and when the car would not move. Often it would get stuck up in the mud and slush. In those days it required several thousands of people to draw the car by the two ropes attached to it in front. Usually five chariots are drawn round – those of Lord Nataraja, of His consort Sakti Sivakamasundari, of Ganesa, of Subrahmanya and of Chandesa. That of Nataraja is the biggest and the others are smaller. These five are the *Pancha murti* in Siva worship.

After the car returns to its place (or stand, as it is called), Nataraja is carried into the temple and placed in the Deva Sabha in the Thousand Pillared Hall. Early next morning even by 3 a. m. an *abhishekam* commences. More than a hundred thousand people take turns in witnessing the *abhisheka*. Then there is the *alankara*, decking the form of Nataraja with jewels and flowers. The form thus decked is a glorious sight to see. Then, at an auspicious moment, Nataraja is carried out into the open corridor,

before entering the temple. As He is descending the steps of the Hall, the sound of *Harohara* from several hundred thousand pairs of lips and hearts in unison rends the air. He is then taken near the temple entrance, brought back to the steps and then to the entrance and so on, thrice. This is the Dance or the symbol of the Dance of Nataraja, the *Ananda Tandavam*, the Dance of Bliss. Thousands upon thousands in the crowd have lived only for this moment. The form of Nataraja is also open at the back without being covered with cloth or flower, and the vision - of Nataraja at the back as well as at the front is a glorious sight for the multitude to treasure for life. Truly did Lord Rothenstein (Curator of the British museum) say that the Form of Nataraja far excels anything conceived in Greek sculpture. As Nataraja enters the temple, a few remain to have *darsan* of Nataraja again at the *Chitsabha* inside the sanctum while most leave the place, to come later at leisure and have the *darsan*.

The form of Nataraja is the most important in all the temples. Nataraja, the Supreme, is Siva. He is the Formless, the Absolute, the One. The form is conceived as a Form of God so that the human mind can grasp it, comprehend it, and work out its own salvation through this comprehension of God's Grace. It should be clearly understood that Siva, the Supreme Being, has no form.

Another important point. There is no external God. God exists in the temple, only for him who realises Him as the One residing and dancing in the innermost recesses of His own heart. Once this understanding comes to him, he will comprehend the Dance of Nataraja, both in the microcosm and in the macrocosm, the infinitesimal and the infinite. Nataraja dances in the heart and dances in the universe. The wise and the enlightened realise this and give themselves up to God. This is the significance of the Dance of Nataraja.

The first dance of Nataraja was performed at Chidambaram for the sake of two sages, Vyagrapada and Patanjali. Vyagrapada desired to be able to climb trees and gather flowers for the Lord's worship and at his request was given the feet and claws of a tiger to help him in climbing (*vyagra*-tiger, *pada* - feet). Patanjali is the serpent, Adishesha, couch of Vishnu. The dance performed for their sake is now there for the mortals to see, to worship and get redeemed. The Dance of Nataraja and His form are symbolic of the many concepts of Saiva Siddhanta relating to the *Panchakshara* and the five-fold function of creation, preservation, dissolution, obscuration and grace.



## PONGAL

The Pongal festival in Tamil Nadu consists of a four day celebration. It celebrates Indra, the Lord of *Marutam*, Surya, the Sun-god, as the giver of all bounty, and the cow as man's greatest helper through the ages, on the first three days.

The Bhogi is the first of the four days. Pongal proper is on the first of the Tamil month of Thai and Bhogi is a day earlier, on the last day of the previous month, Marhali in the Tamil calendar.

The term bhogi implies the enjoyer of pleasures. Bhogi is Indra, the Lord of the celestials and the giver of rain. This day was the famous *Indra vilo*, festival of Indra, celebrated in *Silappadhikaram* and *Manimekhalai*, the great Tamil epic poems.

The Pongal day on the first day of *Uttarayana*, is called the Makara Sankranti or simply the *Sankranti* day, on which the sun passes from the ninth sign (*rasi*) of the Zodiac to the tenth sign the Makara (known as the month of Thai).

There is a proverb that Thai always helps people to find the way out); for the cultivator, for the indebted, for the unemployed, for maids to be married, and many more, Thai offers solutions. This only signifies the relative affluence in which the month places everyone.

This day is celebrated by all people as the most auspicious. On this day the sun turns back from the southernmost point. At this point he is at the longest distance from the earth and from the part of it which corresponds to the South of India. Hence the heat received from the sun is least now and we experience a spell of cold. His retracing his steps northward signifies the dispelling of the cold and the ushering in of greater light and warmth. The first day of this month symbolizes this introduction of warmth and no wonder it is welcomed.

Parents remember their daughters, and brothers remember their sisters, and send them, not paper greetings, but presents of some of the good things of life and try to light up their homes. Women folk today remember on this occasion the homes of their birth with joy and pride.

The pongal festival takes its name from the Tamil root *pongu*, to cook, boil over and overflow. *Pongal* is the verbal noun from *pongu*. When newly harvested rice is cooked in a mud pot, over an open fire in the yard made in a newly formed oven in brick, it boils over and this is called pongal. The entire festival takes its name from this, Figuratively it is to swell up with joy. On this day, the rice which is boiled in milk, boils up and overflows; people

take it as a good augury; women and children shout *pongalo pongal* and the festival itself takes its name from this feature. The season is also one when every rural household is really swelling with joy and happiness born out of the satisfaction of having produced real wealth and so the name pongal is doubly appropriate.

The Almighty cannot be seen or grasped by the senses. Man sees His glory and benevolence through the sun which is, in a sense, His visible form. All our prayers in the morning and in the evening are directed to the sun and through him to God.

The open yard celebration is symbolic of this concept. The sun travelling over the head in all his glory is directly sought to be propitiated and the puja takes place usually between the hours of 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.

The next day's celebration is called *Mattup-pongali* or go-puja. The fourth day is the annual *kari-nal*; this is an inauspicious day and no serious activity is attempted on this day. Instead, the whole day is set apart for games and play.

The cow has been the most valuable and cherished companion of prehistoric man in his nomadic life. The cow provided man food in the first stage and was, in a sense, responsible for man's very survival on earth. Then the male of the species, the bull, came to be used for transport. Probably ancient man rode the bull and later, harnessed it to wheels, to carry him and his goods. Then when man invented agriculture, the bull was harnessed to the plough, and civilization dawned on the Human race. In the Saiva religion, the bull is the mount of Siva, the supreme Being.

The cow is the most auspicious object for any good act and we have even today the ritual of taking a cow with its calf into a newly built house, the actual *graha-pravasam* being made by the owners themselves, after the cow.

The same puja to the Sun-God is performed this day also. Then the cow is fed with the food-rice and other dishes and banana fruits, previously offered to Surya in the court yard. The entire family prostrates before the cow and then goes into the house for lunch.

All the people attend a temple service in the evening. From the temple, everyone goes home and prostrates before his parents and elders and then visits the houses of the elders to prostrate before them and receive their blessings. Women also are required to visit the relatives and receive their blessings. Visit to the elders patches up any earlier misunderstandings and breeds good will and a new cheer.



## MAHA SIVARATRI

Siva, the Unmanifest, is considered to have manifested Himself in the form of an Effulgent Light, in a Sivalinga in times of yore on this particular day, the 14th day of the dark fortnight of Magha masa, at dead of night. He is believed to be present and to manifest himself in all the Siva lingas on this night. Hence the particular day and the night thereof are of great importance to the Saivas.

The day is observed as one of fasting. Members of the non-vegetarian sections of society forego meat for the day. All people bathe once again in the evening and attend the congregational worship in the local temple at the end of each quarter of the night. Bathing in a sacred river is considered to be of a great virtue.

Fasting has been held to confer immense benefits on man from time immemorial. All religions have been enjoining their devotees to fast on some days in the year and turn their thoughts godward.

The Maha Sivaratri occurs in the month of Masi in Tamil (called Magha masa in the Sanskrit and the Saka reckoning, corresponding to February-March).

The worship of Siva as the Supreme Being, the Absolute of metaphysics, knows no beginning, and the tenets of the Saiva religion were not laid down by any prophet. It may appear strange that the religion had evolved itself along with the culture and the civilization of the people.

Puja during the night is important and even small temples perform the puja in an elaborate manner. The temple orchestra or *nagasvaram*, which though absent on other days, sounds during the four quarters of the night. The priest bathes four times in the night and offers four different kinds of rice food offerings during the four occasions. Puja during each of the four quarters is important. The flowers for archana and food offering vary with each quarter. The flower is the lotus for the first quarter and the food offering is the pulse-ghee-rice (*paruppu pongal*). It is *tulasi* leaves for flower and rice payasam for the second quarter. Be it remembered that *tulasi* (the common basil) though a favourite with Vishnu is also eligible for Sivarchana. For the third quarter it is *vilva* and *ellannam* (sesame powder-rice.) For the fourth quarter it is *nilotpala* or *sengalunir* (the blue nelumbium flower or the red one) and plain rice (*ven-pongal*). Where different flowers cannot be had, *vilva* leaves may be substituted. Similarly for *naivedya*. Where the different varieties cannot be prepared, a simple offering of plain rice and ghee will do. According to the desire of the worshipper, *vadai*, *sundal* etc. may be added.

Elaborate *abhisheka* on the four occasions is important. All the materials for anointment are used now – oil, *panchamirta*, ghee, milk, curds, honey, sugarcane juice, coconut water, fruits and sandal paste are used. The last puja is done at day break. The worshippers receive only the sacred ash as the *prasadam* of Siva. After worship, they go home and have a full meal. They are expected to keep awake for the night and stay in the temple uttering *Sivanama*.

Those who have had initiation in the *atmartha puja*, i.e., personal worship of God in their home, likewise bathe four times in the night and perform the pujas also with *vilva* leaves and in addition attend the temple worship. They are expected to utilize as many of the *abhisheka* materials as they can gather. The belief is that those who perform puja in this manner or witness the temple puja and participate in the worship will attain moksha; i.e., they will have no more births and deaths.

Banaras, the seat of all Hinduism and also of Saivism, has been the important shrine for the Sivaratri festival. Although all shrines are efficacious, Tirukkalatti, Tiruvaikavur and Srisailam (Andhra Pradesh) in South India hold equal importance. Many epigraphical records of the Chola dynasty record endowments to several temples for various items connected with the Sivaratri worship.

The Sivaratri day is also held sacred by the Jains who call it the day on which Sri Rishabha deva attained nirvana.

Varada panditar of Jaffna has strung together the several legends relating to the Sivaratri worship into a small *purana* in Tamil.

Many of the major Tamil puranas have chapters on Sivaratri. For example the *Upadesa Kanda* of Jnana Varodya (of the early 15th century) deals with this vratha in 25 verses. It mentions the several categories of the *vrata* and gives an account of the celestials and the hunter who observed the Sivaratri vigil and puja and were blessed by Siva. It gives also the classification of the different categories of Sivaratri. Besides it narrates the story of a *pulaichi* (a low class woman) who went begging for alms; a wayfarer threw her a *vilva* leaf which she in turn threw aside. It fell on a Sivalinga and this act took her to the heavens.



## MAHA MAGHAM

The greatest South Indian festival is probably the Mahamagham festival at Kumbhakonam in the Tanjavur district on the southern bank of the River, Kaveri, occurring once in twelve years. The last festival occurred on the 1st March 1980, on the Masi Magham day and the next will occur in February - March 1992. The 1980 festival attracted over two million people from all over India and abroad. The festival is similar to the Kumbha mela of Prayag but is celebrated over a tank. The tradition in India with regard to sacred places is that the *murti*, *sthala* and *tirtta* are important and are to be worshipped.

The city of Kumbhakonam takes its name from this aspect of Siva as Kumbhesvara, the Lord who came out of a pot. His consort is Devi Mangalambika, the giver of all prosperity; Her worship is even today believed to bestow all *mangala* on the devotee. This temple is the largest and the most magnificent in the city and is also the most ancient. There are besides three other important Siva temples and three Vishnu temples here, but the Nagesvara temple is the most superb creation of Chola art.

The most famous Vishnu temple is the Sarangapani temple. The presiding deity here is known as Aravamudan, on whom the alvar had sung many hymns. It is a well known legend that one song on this temple was responsible for making Nathamunihal to become aware of the existence of the *Nalayirap-prabandham* which were in obscurity till his day, and then go to Nammalvar's place in search of them, and finally for compiling them and making them available to posterity. The Ramaswami temple though not so ancient, has many wonderful sculptures of the Nayak period.

The city has many tanks of which the Mahamagham tank is the biggest and most important, covering an area of about six and a half acres. It has granite steps on all the four sides leading from the top to the bed of the tank. There are twenty deep wells in the bed of the tank which supply water to it from their springs. All the holy rivers of India are considered, according to the puranas, to have a confluence in the tank on this maha magham day. The *devaram* hymns of St. Appar mention the Kaveri, Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Godavari, Kumari, Gomati, Sarayu and some others. Nine *tirttas* or nine sacred rivers are said to be present here and they are besides those mentioned Narmada and Vegavati. When people go and bathe in the sacred rivers on important occasions, the river's sanctity is such that it absolves the people of all their sins. But the rivers accumulate all those sins and they are held to

get rid of them by going over to this city on this day, mingling with the waters of the tank and worshipping Siva here on this occasion, and then returning to their own places elsewhere. The rivers are said to leave behind a part of their sakti which enriches the sanctity and potency for removal of sin of the maha magham tank through the years.

Mahamagham is the day on which Jupiter enters the Simha rasi (Leo); the sun the presiding deity of Simha rasi is at the Kumbha rasi (aquarius) one of the houses of Saturn, his son. Chandra (the moon) goes to Jupiter in the simha rasi, the day being the full moon day (pournami) with Magha nakshatra and the sun has a full vision of Jupiter and Chandra and these two in turn have a full vision of Saturn. This is briefly stated as the day when Jupiter is in simha rasi on the full moon day in connection with the *Magha nakshatra* in the month of Masi.

The Kumbhesvarar temple and all the other local temples have an *utsava* which commences ten days earlier and culminates on this day. Special business centres are opened everywhere and the city witnesses a large mass of humanity even a fortnight earlier than the festival.

On the maha magham day, Lord Kumbhesvara is taken out in procession along with his consort, Sakti Mangalambikai, on their *Rishabha* mount to the northern bank of the tank. All the other presiding deities of the various Siva and Vishnu shrines in the city are brought in a similar manner to their respective places around the tank and stationed in specially erected pavilions. At the appointed hour a puja is performed to Kumbhesvara, a *diparadhana*, food offering and other adjuncts of the puja are completed.

The *archaka* holds the *Astra deva* in his hands and has a dip in the water. This is the moment of bath in the Mahamagham tank. The *astra devas* of all the assembled *murtis* are given a similar bath simultaneously. When the *Astra deva* is immersed, the entire mass of humanity, which is standing in the bed of the tank, has a dip in the water as best as it could. Only heads could be seen over the entire area of the six acres besides the steps and corridors, all along the four sides.

All the people then walk up to the Kaveri where again they take a second bath in the Kaveri river,. Thus culminates the festival. People stay on in the place for shopping, sight seeing, visting temples and so on or disperse and go back to their homes. The grandeur of the mahamagham bath has to be seen to be believed.



## BRAHMOTSAVAM

The Brahmotsava is an annual feature in all Tamil Nadu temples of Siva, Vishnu or minor deities. The festival takes place usually for ten days, ending on the Panguni Uttiram day. Some major temples have the festival on different occasions and even more than once. For example, the festival in the Nataraja temple of Chidambaram takes place in connection with Ardra Darsanam in Marhali and with Anī Tīrumanjanam in Anī. So also in Sri Rangan, Tiruppati, Madurai and similar other places. On all the days of the ten day festival, the chief deity is taken round the main streets, called *mada vidhi* or car streets (the streets along which the temple car is drawn on the ninth day of the festival) at night time, brightly illuminated with lamps and accompanied by the *nagasvaram* orchestra and the singing of the Vedas and *Devaram*, or *Nalayiram* songs as the case may be.

The ten day festival is almost identical in all the temples and it follows a set pattern. The first is *kodiyetral* or *dvajarahana*, flag hoisting; there is always a flagstaff outside the *sannidhi* to the top of which the banner of Siva, having a picture of His mount, the Rishabha, is hoisted after due rituals. The priests who officiate in the temple on this occasion should not leave the station until all the ten day celebrations are over. On this day Siva gives a darsan under the temple tree (*sthala vriksha*); this symbolizes cosmic Creation. On the second day He mounts the Suryaprabha and the Chandraprabha and goes on a procession along the main streets. This symbolizes the second function of Preservation. On the third day, the mount is Adhikara Nandi and Bhutavahana, signifying dissolution. The fourth day is the palanquin and the *naga* (serpent) mount, denoting the fourth function of obscuration.

The fifth day is a grand event. Siva goes round mounted on the special chariot called *sapparam*, specially devised for this particular night's function. This is known also as *Teruadaichan* (covering the street), since it is constructed as wide as the street itself. It is constructed in the evening and most tastefully devised and decorated like the frontal appearance of the temple *gopuram* (tower), only with the help of the tender white coconut leaves and palmyrah leaves and the dark green mango leaves. This is a highly skilled work of art, which employs only local talent, irrespective of caste or creed and no one was hired to do this work for money. The chariot is drawn along the four main streets round the temple at night and brought back in the small hours of the morning.

The sixth day is the elephant mount. The seventh is generally the *Tirukkalyanam*, the symbolic wedding of Siva and Sakti in each temple. This is a very elaborate and important festival which again signifies the preservation of the created world. The eighth day's festival is equally important; it is the *Bhikshatana* form, when Siva goes out in the form of a beggar, inducing souls to cast off their ignorance and ego. But how many do it?

The ninth day's festival is the crowning glory of the Brahmotsava, this being the day of the car festival. Siva along with Sakti, in the pattern of the Panchamurtis (Ganesa, Subramanya, Siva, Sakti and Chandesa) is mounted on a chariot, or several chariots where the resources of the temple permit it, and goes a round of the streets. The temple car is drawn with two stout ropes often about twenty feet long, with all people, men of all ages, creed and castes tugging at it. The proverb was that for drawing the car, no one was taboo; in fact untouchability was taboo on this particular day and celebration. The mirth and joy of the festivals are at their highest on this day.

The tenth day ends the festival. On this day, the deities are taken to the temple tank and the Astra deva, the weapon-power of Siva, is given a ceremonial bath in the tank. This is symbolic of the bath of Siva Himself. Then the flag hoisted on the first day is lowered, and this concludes the Brahmotsava.

The Vishnu temples also follow the same pattern. They have the usual flag hoisting, the car festival and the *tirttavari* and the flag lowering. The mounts and the taking out of the deities vary. They have the Surya and the Chandra prabhas, the Garuda vahana, the Vennaittali (Krishna, the child, stealing butter from the Gopis' houses), the Kalinga narttana, the Hanuman vahana, the horse mount, and the *tirttavari* or the *avabrithotsava*.

All these festivals are taking the Lord even to the doors of the devotees themselves and aim at making even those, who had been denied temple admission, have a darsan of the Lord at close quarters on a number of occasions and derive joy and satisfaction and solace. All classes of the people can now see the Lord and enjoy His form, dress, ornaments, floral arrangement etc. This had helped in the past to retain a cohesion in the Hindu community to a considerable extent.

The festival is an outstanding manifestation of God's mercy and His concern for the upliftment of the individual soul. Where man does not go to Him, He goes to him for redeeming him.



## KUMBHABHISHEKAM

The term *Kumbha-abhishekam* simply means anointing the Lord in the temple (*abhisheka*) with the mantra water from the *kumbha* (pot). The saying is that Siva is fond of *abhisheka* and so Siva and His temple are given the very elaborate *abhisheka*. Hence *Kumbhabhishekam* is done only in a Siva temple and not for a Vishnu temple; in the latter case, the corresponding ritual is known as *samprokshanam* (sprinkling with mantra water). So all such rituals are associated with water and with mantras. Brahma usually has no separate temple and so the question does not arise in his case.

*Kumbhabhishekam* and *samprokshanam* are both a ritual of re-consecration of the whole temple and of the deities therein. It is also performed when a new temple is constructed and is consecrated. The Siva linga or other deity installed in the sanctum is just a piece of stone newly carved and installed. The installation is not mere placing of the image in position. Vedic mantras are chanted, *homas* are performed a number of times, six, four or two in a *yagasala* and *kunda* of the appropriate size and shape, in front of the requisite number of pots of water, entwined outwardly with a piece of thread and containing scented water covered by mango leaves at the centre of which a coconut is placed. After the several occasions of puja and the final sacrifice in the fire (*purnaahuti*), the water in the pots is carried by the Sivacharyas reverently around the temple corridors (*prakaras*) with the accompaniment of *vadyam* music and the *archana* of flowers, and then ceremonially poured over the *vimana* or tower over the censer on the cupola at the auspicious moment. This pouring of water is the *kumbha-abhishekam*. The potency of the deity is thus sought to be transferred from the mantra water in the *kumbha* to the *vimana kalasa* (or the deity inside the sanctum) in this manner. This is consecration. From then onward, what was the sculptured stone comes to divine life as a deity and daily pujas begin to be performed for it and the whole becomes thereafter a consecrated temple.

This is in respect of a new installation and consecration. The same process is adopted in respect of a temple, which may have become old and dilapidated and require repairs. For the purpose of effecting repairs, the divine potency existing in the deities, image and *vimanas*, is drawn out into the pots of water by means of mantras; a physical drawal of power is also sought to be effected by connecting the image in the sanctum with the pot of water by

means of a string made of *darbha* grass. After all the kumbha pujas are over, the potency is re-transferred physically by drawing the power from the pots into the image by the same string of grass and esoterically by the abhisheka of the kumbha mantra water on the image.

The Kumbhabhisheka is a very rare event. Because of the preparation and materials involved, it has become very costly. The nature, variety and number of the firewood (*samit*) used to feed the *homa kundas*, the number of *kundas* depending on the number of images and *vimanas* to be consecrated, the varieties of pulses, fruits, ghee and other materials to be dropped into the agni in the *homakunda*, and their various quantities and measures are all clearly specified in the agama sastra. For every main kumbha, there may be scores of esoteric *parivaradevatas* and *vastras* (clothes) have to be provided for all of them. Then for each kunda there is an officiating priest as well as a director or guide. There is a general over-all Director. The feeding of all these Sivacharyas for three or four days, the presentation of dhotis etc. for them for the occasion and then the remuneration - all these will be quite a huge amount.

Hence Kumbhabhishekam is not an easy affair. Although a kumbhabhisheka is prescribed once in twelve years, it takes quite a longer time, even sixty years. Hence participating in one such and having a darsan is said to absolve man of all sins and give him salvation. Hence a kumbhabhishekam in even an insignificant temple gathers a very large crowd of people of all classes. On the night of the festival, the Panchamnrti procession is usually organised. The *nagasvaram* orchestra, *Devaram* singing, Veda recital, and fire works, not to say the very elaborate decoration of the processional murtis, all together constitute the greatest attraction for the people, men, women and children. For the major shrines people collect from hundreds of miles away and camp in the place for several days.

The Kumbhabhishekam is one of the factors which have helped to continue the culture through the centuries. The rituals, the mantras, the music of the *nagasvaram*, the *Devaram* songs, the Veda recital, the decorations, the vast wealth of materials used, their gathering, storing and distribution and the feeding - all provide employment for the people at all levels for months on end and they leave memories which are treasured for years.



## FIRE-WALKING

Fire walking, called in Tamil *timiti* is one of the popular festival rituals associated with minor deities such as Mariyamman in the whole of Tamilnad. Names like Sitala devi may appear high sounding but for all that Mari is just a minor deity, a tutelary deity who is always kept on the outskirts of the village proper and never allowed entry into the Siva temple.

But one thing should be carefully remembered, Kali is not Mari, Kali is an aspect of Sakti, like Durga. This aspect was assumed for a definite purpose and Kali is installed, unlike Mari, on the inner corridors (circuits, *prakara*) of a Siva temple in many places. The famous shrine of Kali is Tillai Makali at Chidambaram, who contested with Lord Nataraja Himself in the Dance. Fire-walking also takes place in the Kali temple festivals but this does not make the two one. Kali was the aspect of Sakti, who came out to destroy Darukasura.

Fire-walking, as a ritual, related to a temple festival is found throughout Tamilnad. It is no doubt a primitive rite, which does require a considerable amount of blind faith and devotion, courage and dedication but it is not a gruesome one like sati (death of a wife on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband) or like a human sacrifice, said to be prevalent in many parts of India even a few decades ago. But fire-walking is a rite undergone willingly by many and witnessed by thousands.

Men and women do it, old and young, the orthodox brahmins and the lower classes, the educated and the illiterate, the poor man and the well-to-do, the believer and even the scoffer. For the moment the scoffer does convert himself into a believer, by undergoing all the rigours and disciplines prescribed for the devotee. No one is able to say what makes such different types of people do it and bear the possible burning of the soles of the feet. All people walk through the fire with a smiling countenance, and even those who start with some hesitation and fear, end up with smiles and peace.

For this performance, the arrangement of the fire-pit is most important. It is said to require expert skill. Anyone cannot make the fire. It is traditionally men of the carpenter class in the rural parts who are skilled in this through hereditary practice. The top surface is generally even, without any small fires and is a glow of bright red, without any white or black surface.

The pit is about ten feet long and three feet wide, with a depth of nine inches. Good logs of the black acacia (babul) in suitable

sizes are burnt in the pit itself. The burning work is commence some two hours earlier. Twigs, leaves etc. are removed.

The day previous to the day of the fire-walking the walkers follow a routine of intense personal discipline. They eat only light food, non-vegetarians eschew meat on the two days, and married people live separate; no tobacco, no intoxicants. The fire-walker with a rhizome of turmeric wound round his wrist in a yellow thread (*kappu*) is now ready. Through the centuries fire has been seen not to scorch those who have undergone this preparatory discipline including the *kappu*. But fire had been seen to burn and blister the soles of those who enter the fire without undergoing this discipline on the previous day. It is also common knowledge that scoffers and unbelievers have been severely burnt.

On the day of the fire-walking, they have an early morning bath, and fast till the ritual is over. As the *karaham* goes forward there is loud drum beating and a sort of frenzy works up among the dedicated. There is a general fear that any slackness in the discipline will result in the burning of the feet during the walking.

Some walk as if in a trance and as they cover the fire pit and reach the other end, they are taken into the arms of friends waiting there. The only *prasadam* for them is the sacred ash and the *kumkum* distributed by the temple priests. Fire-walking (*ti-miti*) is said in some areas to be *poo-miti*, walking on flowers! For most of the unmarried women who undergo what to others is an ordeal, it is indeed not a fire-walking ordeal, but really a *poo-miti* or flower-walking.

Fire-walking appears to have spread to the countries where the Tamil people had migrated for business and trade. In such places the local people seem to have copied the ritual and are found to be doing it even now in worshipping their own deities. For example we find it in Kuala Lumpur, not only among the Indians but among the Chinese also. The Paradise Temple of that city (in Thien-Kong) has a fire-walking. Chinese people, more than 100 men at a time dress themselves in white as a symbol of the purity of their vow at the moment of worship, walk across charcoal-fire bare-footed, carrying the images of their Chinese gods and chanting their prayers for pardon of their sins.

However, we should remember that fire walking is not associated with the sanctified temples or the Supreme Being.



## VAIKUNTHA EKADASI

The most important among the annual festive celebrations in Vaishnavism is the Vaikuntha Ekadasi, celebrated on the eleventh day of the bright fortnight of the Tamil month of Marhali (December-January). It is principally a day of fasting and keeping awake at night. The belief is that if one went without any food for the day and night and also keep awake the whole of the night, going and worshipping Vishnu in the temple, he is certain to gain admission to Vaikuntha, the abode of Lord Vishnu.

Devout people observe the fast and *vrata* very scrupulously and, on the early morning of the next day, go to the temple to have a darsan of Lord Vishnu and offer worship. There is a special entrance to the Lord's presence in important temples which is generally closed all through the year and opened for the going in and coming out for the Lord's image on the twelve days, beginning from the first day of the bright fortnight in the month of Marhali. This is called the *svarga vasal* (gateway to Heaven). It is opened for the devotees on the morning for admission, as entry now signifies entry into Vaikuntha itself.

After entry and worship, they return home for the first meal after about fortytwo hours. They are specially enjoined to have a dish of *agatti* leaves (the edible *sesbania*) on account of a legend from the Mahabharata. After the evil Duryodhana had driven away the Pandavas to the forest, he planned to ruin them further. He invited Sage Durvasa notorious for his hot temper and quick unforgiving curses, pleased him with his hospitality and entertainment, and sent him to the Pandavas in the forest at an untimely hour, so that when the sage arrived at their place in hunger, they would not be in a position to feed him properly and thereby would incur his curses. The sage did go there and the Pandavas were in the same predicament; they had no food to serve him. Draupadi prayed to Krishna, who found a piece of the cooked *sesbania* left sticking to the vessel in which their food was earlier prepared and with it he converted the vessel into an *akshaya patra*, one which supplied an infinite and never-ending quantity of good food. Durvasa ate this and went away blessing the Pandavas. That day happened to be the *dvadasi*, the day after *ekadasi* and from that day the habit of taking a *sesbania* preparation on *dvadasi* to break the fast of *ekadasi* became a religious practice.

The *sesbania* leaf is rich in A vitamin and is a good corrective for many deficiencies of vision. Hence the partaking of the green leaf is attended with salutary nutritional effects.

SECTION 6

ACHARYAS



## SAINT JNANASAMBANDHAR

He was born in Sikali in the Chola country and at the young age of three, Divine Grace visited him. Parasakti fed him mother's milk in a cup and immediately he acquired supreme knowledge and also the gift of poesy. He travelled from early childhood through the entire country, visiting temples, singing songs, helping people even materially and directing them to a godly way of life. He received golden cymbals from God for marking time while singing as a little child in the temple, a pearl palanquin on which to ride on his travels, a pearl umbrella and canopy, and such other articles of comfort; they were given to him by God to help him, child that he was.

He always prayed to God for the relief of people from suffering. His prayers had worked many miracles; they had helped the daughter of a local chief to get over a painful bodily affliction; helped the devotees of God to get over fevers during a spell of cold; helped a young damsel to bring back to life her lover who had died of a snake bite; helped the people to get over a scourge of famine by grant of gold; enabled the devotees to cross a river in an unmanned boat; and helped a follower of Siva by making all his male palmyra trees bear fruit. He gave his father a purse of gold from God, to perform a sacrifice, for overcoming evil and for spreading good.

His most glorious achievement was his struggle with the Jain priests at Madurai in the presence of the Pandiya king. At the request of the Pandiya queen he went there, had a contest with them in philosophic discussion, and came out successful with the help of God. The king's fever was cured by him, the palm-leaf on which his song was written was fresh and unscorched when placed on the fire, and another such leaf of his floated on the waters against the current of the river Vaihāi. His miracles won the king back to the Saiva faith.

Appar, an elder saint of the same period, heard of his love of God and of the miracles performed on his account, saw him and the two became friends. One Nilakantha, a low caste musician playing on the *yaal*, himself a saintly soul, accompanied his songs on the instrument. Sambandhar once demonstrated to him the superiority of his vocal music over the instrumental, holding that the voice was God-made music, while the other was only man-made.

At Mayilappur, through Divine Grace again, he caused the bones of a dead girl to come back to life as a full grown girl, for the love of her father. Returning home from his travels, he took

part in his own wedding function and clasping the hand of his bride, entered a huge Divine Effulgence along with all those assembled for the wedding function, and attained final beatitude.

The incidents in the life of Sambandhar are many. To help suffering people, he caused miracles to happen. He never asked for anything for himself but always prayed for divine intercession for relieving the suffering of mankind. That was the keynote of his life, quite in consonance with his young and impulsive age. His mission in life was, besides the spreading of Saivism by his songs, to restore the Tamil culture and Tamil music in Pandinad and to help suffering humanity.

Among the hymn singers, he was the greatest beyond doubt. He attained beatitude at the young age of sixteen; but the volume of his writing now available is indeed quite large; his is the largest contribution in the Saiva canon. The greatest contribution of Sambandhar to Tamil literature is in the field of music. Though music formed the second division of Tamil, it had been ruthlessly suppressed by the austerity of Jainism in the three centuries, 3 - 6 A.D. It is to the lasting glory of Sambandhar that he actually resurrected Tamil music and placed it on the high pedestal due to it, single-handed. He calls himself in many of his poems, Sambandha, master of Tamil and of Music. Other hymnists in Saivism and vaishnavism had, no doubt, sung musical pieces, but no one called himself a master and champion of music or gave such importance to music in his songs, and no one has been acclaimed in later literature and legend as a great exponent of music.

Sambandhar has also sung many lyrical poems on the *aham* model, placing himself in the positions of a maiden pining for the love of the Lord. Many of such verses are supremely lyrical.

Sambandhar has sung on the largest number of shrines; he has also sung the largest number of musical tunes. He has made many innovations in Tamil metre and patterns of poetry. He rules that we shall not try to fathom the mystery of the conferment of His Grace with our limited language and our limited reasoning faculty – it is unfathomable; those who desire to get over the ills of life should have faith in Him.

Though Sambandhar carried on a relentless fight against alien religious, yet, believing in the All pervasive Siva, he could not help singing that even their untune words express only His sport.



## SAINT APPAR

Appar was a senior contemporary of Sambandhar, Born at Tiru Amur, a village in the South Arcot district in a *velalar* family, he was a very learned man in his early years. His elder sister, Tilakavati, was betrothed to a young soldier who died on the battlefield; as both their parents had died by that time, she was prepared to give up her life after her betrothed, but did not do so, and lived on at the request of her younger brother who was then a young boy without a proper guardian. This young man however strayed into the Jain fold, forsaking his own sister and his own ancient faith. She prayed to Siva enshrined at Tiru Adhihai to redeem him and, on her account, Siva caused a painful colic to afflict the young man, who, unable to cure it by all the medicine and mantras of Jainism, returned in the darkness of the night to his sister. She took him to the temple and placed the sacred ash on his forehead. When he worshipped at the temple, his pain ceased and he was also granted the gift of poesy. He sang such sweet songs there that Siva gave him the title, the Prince of the Tongue, *Tiru Navukkarasu*.

He went about singing the praise of Siva in all the shrines, at the same time performing manual service like cleaning the temple premises etc., in each shrine with a hand shovel. As he was now considered to be a renegade dangerous to Jainism, the Jain priests induced the Pallava ruler, Mahendra Varma, to kill him. Accordingly, Appar was, in turn, placed in a lime kiln, given poisoned food, placed before an elephant for being trampled under its feet; but he came out of all of these unscathed. Then they tied him to a stone and dropped him into the sea. Uttering the Lord's name as usual, he floated on the stone and reached the shore safely. The king realised the greatness and devotion of Tirunavukkarasu to God and embracing Saivism, became his follower. He pulled down Jain temples and constructed many Siva temples. The Saint then toured the land visiting temples, singing the praise of Siva and doing manual service in each temple. At Tiru Nallur, he had the holy feet of Siva planted on his head. At Tingalur, his songs brought back to life the son of Appudi, who had died of a snake bite. He befriended Sambandhar and at Tiruvilimilalai received gold from Siva at a time of famine there in order to help his followers with food. At Palayarai, a former Chola capital city, finding that the Siva temple was closed and fully covered up with sand by the Jains there, he went on a fast; the local ruler thereupon caused the temple to be unearthed. His satyagraha,

if we may call it so, had the desired result. At Painneeli, as he was walking along much fatigued in body, Siva appeared and gave him food.

Trying to walk up to Mount Kailas, the abode of Siva, he had a vision of the cosmic parenthood of God as manifest in all creation as Sakti-Sivam, at Tiru Aiyaru. He was called Appar (the father) by Sambandhar and thereafter he came to be known by that name. He lived on to a ripe old age. When he was cleaning the temple premises at Puhalur, his spade turned up sparkling gems and glittering gold from the earth; he threw away everything as so much potsherd. Celestial nymphs danced before him but he saw in them not enticement but only a manifestation of the Grace of God. Finally, he entered final beatitude at the feet of Siva, the Lord of the Puhalur shrine.

His language and thought express a richness of experience and maturity of wisdom, which is rare among younger people. His *Tirunerisai* used to be sung by the canon singers (known as *oduvar*) in the tune of the *Samaveda*; even vedic singers used to listen to their recital spell-bound, with admiration.

Along with all the great spiritual thinkers, Appar also believes that God-realisation can result only through His Grace. It is very remarkable that his devotion had universal acclaim in his own day. Appudi, a brahmin of distant Tingalur, had made many public benefactions in Appar's name, even without seeing him. Appar generally made no prayer for divine intervention by miracles; a solitary exception is the bringing back to life of Appudi's son.

Appar is himself known as the Prince of *Tandakam*; Tiru mangai alvar on a later day composed a poem of 30 verses on his model. The *tandakam* is a long-drawn verse with eight feet to the line.

He spurned the pleasures of life and preached a unique freedom of the soul and his songs are a clarion-call of this freedom. This spirit has enabled him to see God in everything. Caste and class are nothing; he is prepared to worship even an outcaste and a leper if God dwells in his heart. He never laments that God deserted him, he is sure of God's succour and grace; in that blissful assurance, he says his duty is only to do His service, without caring for any return, that work is worship.

Many of his sayings have become proverbial, expressing in crisp and e telling language the wisdom of the ages.



## SAINT SUNDARAR

Sundarar was the legendary companion of Siva in Kailas. As his mind strayed towards two nymphs who were attendants of Sakti Parvati there, he was caused to be born on earth. He was born at Tiru Navalur in a Sivacharya family. Siva appeared before him as a brahmin, stopped a marriage arranged for him and taking him as a comrade made him sing His praises. Touring Siva shrines, he went to Tiru Arur and there married one of the celestial nymphs, now born there as Paravai. He had a huge mound of rice, presented to him by an admirer, removed to her house with the help of Siva's forces. At Puhalur, he prayed for gold for the sake of Paravai, and the bricks which he used as a head-rest (pillow) during his sleep at night were found changed into gold ingots. He dropped the gold given to him by Siva at Mudukunru into the river there and recovered it later in the tank at Tiru Arur, some seventy miles away. On his way to Kuruhavur he had food served to him by Siva. Again at Tiruk-Kachur when he was hungry Siva begged for alms along the streets and brought him food.

He went to Tiru Otriyur and there married the second damsel from Kailas, who was born there as Sangili, with the promise that he would never leave her. But actually when the memory of the festivals at Tiru Arur came to him, in the month of March, he left her and started for Arur. He had now broken his promise to Sangili and this violation of ordinary ethical conduct resulted in the loss of the vision of both of his eyes. His prayers to God to restore his vision did not help him then. On his way, at Tiru Venbakkam he received a blind man's staff and at Kanchipuram, he received the vision of his left eye. At Tirut-Turutti his physical ailment was removed by the grace of Siva. At Tiru Arur again, Siva gave him the vision of his right eye also.

When he went home to the house of Paravai, she refused him admission, as she was enraged at him for his second marriage with Sangili. Acting as Sundara's messenger of love, Siva walked to her house twice at night, pacified her and re-united the two. Kalikkama, an ardent bhakta in distant Perumangalam, was enraged at Sundara for his daring to use Siva as his messenger of love. Again Siva intervened and by working a miracle made Kalikkama and Sundara friends.

Seraman Perumal, the Sera ruler from the west coast, came to Tiru Arur and became the bosom friend of Sundara. The Kaveri floods parted to permit them to cross and go over to Seraman's place. Returning from there, Sundara's treasures gifted to him by

Seraman were snatched away by Siva's forces in the guise of highway robbers. He sang on the Lord there and recovered them. At Avinasi, he caused a crocodile to bring back to life a young brahmin boy whom it had devoured years back. Again he went to Seraman's place a second time and from there went to Kailas, riding on a white elephant sent by Siva to fetch him. Seraman also followed, by the practice of yoga.

Sundara's greatest contribution is to the Saiva hagiology where, in a sweet little poem of twelve verses, he says that he is the servant of God by men and enumerates a list of sixty such men and women of God, and nine groups of the devotees of God. This song of his was the inspiration, four centuries later, to Sekkilar for his writing of the *Periya Puranam*.

Following in the tradition of Appar and Sambandhar, his own songs, all set to music, are also simple and sweet. Occasionally there is a pleasant description of nature and a luscious enjoyment of life in his poems, but his mind transcends that plane. In one song, he asks poets to go no more singing the praise of men for material benefits, but to praise the Lord and the Lord only. Some of his most moving songs are those sung when he lost his eye-sight: the affliction there was physical and quite real; his lament is indeed heart-rending.

Although Sundarar is a Saiva Acharya coming immediately after Sambandhar and Appar, his whole life is cast in an altogether different mould. Miracles also happen through him in life; but most of them relate to his own life; they were worked by Siva to provide comforts to him in life; the bringing back to life of a child from a crocodile in Avinasi is the only exception. In this respect, he is different from the two earlier acharyas. His story is much more on the human plane than those of the other two, which are altogether on different planes.

Coming immediately after Appar and Sambandhar, Sundarar frequently refers to them in his songs: he mentions in particular that Sambandhar caused an understanding of God and Tamil through his music. Sundara's songs amount to 1026 verses, all of them in pann, i.e. set to music. The songs of these three Acharyas, Tiru Jnanasambandhar, Tiru Navukkarasu and Sundaramurti are called the Devaram and they form the first seven books of the Saiva Canon (Tirumurai).



## SAINT MANIKKAVACAKAR

He was born in Tiru Vadavur in the Pandiya kingdom and by his great learning rose to be the Prime Minister of the King. He was given a large sum of money and asked to purchase Arab steeds on the east coast for the king's cavalry. On his way to the port Siva appeared before him as a spiritual *guru*, in the shade of a *kurunda* tree and by His *diksha* (gracious look) made him his servant. From that moment, the minister knew nothing on earth except his guru. He sang such moving lyrics on Siva that the guru called him *Manikkavacaka*, he of the gem-like utterances. He spent all the money he had brought from the king in building a temple there.

Finding that the horses did not arrive, the Pandiya sent a messenger to enquire. As instructed by his guru, Manikkavacaka sent back word that the horses would arrive on the Avani mulam day. Finding still no sign of the horses, the king subjected him to many kinds of punishment and torture. But Manikkavacaka had set his heart on Siva and so he bore all the pain with stoic patience. But Siva did bring the horses to the king's presence on the appointed day. He had converted the jackals in the jungles into steeds and now paraded them before the king! The king was pleased and released Manikkavacakar from prison but his freedom was short-lived. By night, the horses again turned into jackals, bit all the real horses in the stables and also the people of Madurai and run away into the jungles. The enraged king naturally punished Manikkavacaka more severely.

Siva was moved by the songs sung by Manikkavacaka while he underwent the king's punishment, and in order to show the true devotion of Manikkavacaka to the king, he caused the river Vaihāi to overflow into the city, breaching all bunds. The king allotted portions of the bund washed away to be rebuilt by the citizens and the breach to be closed up. A small portion allotted to an old woman, Vandi, a baker, was left unattended. Siva appeared before her as a labourer, undertook to do her portion in return for broken cakes, but did not do his work. The king saw this during his inspection of the breaches and thrashed the labourer. But lo! the thrashing that he gave, fell not only on the labourer but on all beings including himself. The king now realised that Siva had enacted this little drama to show the greatness of Maickavacaka and immediately released him from prison, and from service under him, fell at his feet, asking for forgiveness, and sent him on his way.

Manikkavacaka left Madurai, visited many shrines and finally reached Chidambaram, where Buddhists from Sri Lanka engaged him in a philosophical contest. He overcame them by causing the dumb daughter of the Lanka King to speak and refute their arguments. Later, Nataraja The Lord of Chidambaram came before him to write down his songs, *Tiruvacakam*, to his dictation. These He placed on the steps of the Chitsabha (dance hall) in the temple. When the priests saw the songs and the signature of Nataraja, the next morning, they went to Manikkavacaka as directed by Nataraja Himself and asked him for an elucidation of the songs. He took them to the presence of Nataraja in the temple and saying, "He is the elucidation of the songs," entered the sanctum and become one with Him.

The whole of *Tiruvacakam* is sheer poetry, of a very high order; to use the author's own words, it is bone-melting poetry. The book contains 51 separate poems, of which 15 represent folk song motifs. The story goes that he went about mixing with the common people and girls and absorbed the plays and games of the children into his poems to express his feelings of surrender and devotion to God. Many of these motifs had never before been put to this kind of poetic use. His relationship with God is personal; his songs are just his own offerings of his soul at the feet of his master and guru, Lord Siva. In all his poems, he praised the glory of Siva, who had deigned to bestow His infinite grace on himself, humble and undeserving though he be. This element is present in all his songs.

Like every mortal, he had his periods of darkness too, and these are perceivable in the poems. The Uttarakosamangai part of his story bears witness to this element. He had a full realisation of God and ecstatic spiritual joy, but it passes off and a period of temporary darkness sets in; he cries to God in agony and again he has a vision and an experience. This seems to go on until he gets the final realisation in Chidambaram. All these changes in experience are clearly echoed in the songs. Hence the song content is entirely personal. The folk song motifs echo this personal relationship and as a rule they all represent periods of joy and vision, not of despair. Along with the joy of servitude and supplication, there is also in the *Tiruvacakam* a strain of strong conviction that he could not be shaken off. In such places, the poems portray the complete trust and assurance of a little child in its mother.



## SANKARAR

One of the greatest thinkers of the world was Sankara, the brahmin acharya (788-820 A.D.) born at Kaladi (formerly a Tamil area, now in Kerala). His father was Sivaguru, mother Aryamba; names, including his own, indicate that he was born in a Saiva family. Within the short span of his life, he had made the greatest impact on All India. Through divine grace he mastered all worldly and spiritual knowledge while yet young. His father had died when he was three. His mother like any ordinary woman in Hindu society, refused to permit him to take to sannyasa because she wanted him to marry and continue the progeny.

However, when he was one day bathing in the river along with his mother, a crocodile seized his foot; he prayed to her to permit him now at least to take up emergency sannyasa in which case the crocodile would release him, and with her permission, he mentally assumed what is called *apat-sannyasa* (in dire distress). The crocodile released him and soon he began his tours, promising to return and perform the last rites for her when she died.

He met Govinda Bhagavatpada on the banks of the Narmada and deeming him as his guru, went to Banaras under his direction. He had, by this time, established the *Kevaladvaita* doctrine, i.e. that there is nothing anywhere except Brahman. Lord Sankara (Siva) Himself appeared before him in Banaras as a chandala (outcaste) in order to rid him of his pride. When the chandala approached Sankara, he asked him to move away, as the brahmin Sankara would be polluted if the chandala came close to him. Thereupon the smiling chandala simply asked, "whom do you want to move away?" Sankara at once realized his folly and prostrated at the feet of the untouchable. According to Sankara's own philosophy, the Atma in Sankara and in the untouchable was the same and there was no pollution by his approach. Again, according to him, the body is all *maya* to which no pollution could attach. The reply of the untouchable made this meaning dawn upon him.

Then the light dawned upon him that without *upasana*, by man he would come to harm. So he then directed people to perform *pūja* or *upasana* of one of the six - Surya, Siva, Sakti, Vishnu, Ganesa and Kumara, a system of worship which was in vogue in the other strata of contemporary society. Towards this end he wrote many *stotra* poems such as *Bhaja Govindam*, *Soundarya lahari*, *Sivananda lahari*, the *Ashtakams* etc. This gesture gave him the title of the propagator of the six *matas*.

At Banaras, he engaged in a disputation with Mandana misra

the *mimamsaka*. Bharati, wife of Misra, was the judge. She declared Sankara, the Victor. Misra became his own disciple, Suresvaracharya.

Sankara had four disciples-Suresvaracharya, Padmapada, Hastamalaka and Totaka. They wrote mostly elucidations to his own commentaries. He wrote large commentaries (*bhashyas*) on the *Prastana traya* – the three basic texts of Hinduism – the Upanishads, *Brahma Sutras* and *Bhagavat Gita* and through these he established his philosophy of Advaita, called Kevaladvaita and Ekamavada, because he declared only the Brahman existed and all other appearances are mere *maya* or illusion. He toured the whole of north India with a large group of disciples, subduing other religions like Jainism and Buddhism and establishing his own version of the Advaitic philosophy.

Knowing that the end of his mother was drawing near, he returned to his place of birth, Kaladi, offered solace to her during her last days, and performed, on her death, the last rites.

He established four *maths* or monasteries in the four corners of India and placed his disciples in charge – at Sringeri in the south, Puri in the east, Dwaraka in the west and Badari in the north in the Himalayas. Finally he is said to have returned to Kanchipuram in Tamilnad where he passed away. Lines of Acharyas take his name in all these five places and they continue to exist here and propagate their gospel of pure advaita.

Sankara directed his steps to the north because, the land of his birth, Tamilnad, was a devoutly religious land following the path of God. The Saiva acharyas and the Vaishnava alvar had toured the entire Tamil country and had inspired the people through their tours, their divine songs and their very example.

Another point to be emphasized is the religion of Sankara. For one who declares 'aham brahmasmi' – I am the brahman, the Siva or Narayana is immaterial. Hence it is that though the Acharya is named Sankara and performs the atmartha puja of Chandramouli (Siva), such a worship is not part of their philosophy. It is not mentioned in their scriptures. Hence they could call themselves by a Siva name, worship Chandramouli, and yet sign Narayana. The Saivas and the Vaishnavas cannot understand this. Such a dual position is possible in advaita where everything is Brahman and 'I am that Brahman'. That is the position for the smārtha brahmins and is not agreed to or recognized by the knowledgeable Saiva or Vaishnava.



## RAMANUJAR

Ramanuja (1017-1137), the high priest of Vaishnavism, was one of the great revolutionaries of India. He was born at Sri Perumbudur near Madras. He learnt the Vedas for quite a long period and then went to Yadavaprakasa a famous teacher, to study Vedanta. But the teacher's elucidation did not seem to him right and so he left him. During this period, Alavandar, the Vaishnava acharya at Sri Rangam, heard of him and went to see him at Kanchi. He saw him and satisfied that he was quite suitable to be the next acharya, returned without meeting him. Later, when he was on his death bed, he sent his disciple, Periyambadi, to bring Ramanuja to Sri Rangam, but he passed away before Ramanuja could reach there.

Ramanuja was married early to Tanjammal but she did not respect his frame of mind. Ramanuja held Periya nambi as a guru. The two lived in the same house. Her disrespect towards Nambi's wife made him depart Kanchi even without informing Ramanuja. Ramanuja, the realised saint, did not set much store by caste. He held Tiru Kachi Nambi, who was a favourite of Perarulalar, Vishnu enshrined at Kanchi, as another guru. This Nambi was a *vaisya*. Ramanuja invited him one day for lunch in his house. Nambi agreed and went. Ramanuja was absent. Tanjammal served him food, removed the plantain leaf on which food was served to him with a stick and purified the very spot. Ramanuja returned and learned what was done. He took it as an insult to his guru and at the earliest opportunity took to *sannyasa*.

He went to Tirukkotti Nambi to get instruction into the mysteries of the *Tirumantram*; Nambi tested him several times and then only gave him the instruction, with a warning that he should not impart it to any one else and that if he did so, he would be eternally consigned to hell. Learning it, Ramanuja assembled all the devotees, taught them the *Tirumantram* and when his guru took him to ask about it, he replied that if the mantra could take so many devotees to the feet of the Lord, he was prepared to go to hell.

When Ramanuja actually went to see Alavandar, he had died. He found three fingers in his hand were bent. He questioned the disciples nearby whether Alavandar had any wishes unfulfilled. They replied that Alavandar had desired to write a Vaishnava *bhashya* for the Brahma sutra, a *bhashya* for *Tiru Vaymoli* of Nammalvar, and a Vaishnava *bhashya* for the *Vishnu sahasranama* and that all these had remained unfulfilled. Ramanuja

promised at the time to fulfil them and immediately the fingers straightened. Later, he himself wrote the *Sri Bhashya* on the Brahma sutras, ordered his disciple Tiru Kuruhaippiran pillan to write his bhashya on *Tiru Vaymoli* and directed Parasara Bhattar to write the Vaishnava bhashya on the *Vishnu sahasranama* and thus fulfilled the wishes of Alavandar.

The harijans of Melkote (Tiru Narayana puram) saved him from being caught by the Delhi Sultan's soldiers, when he was fleeing with the image of Ramapriya taken from the Sultan's daughter who had it after the Sultan's forces looted Tirunarayana puram. Out of gratitude, he permitted them to enter the temple and worship and bathe in the temple tank on certain occasions, practices which obtain even today. He permitted them to learn the vedas and to have the initiation of *panchasamskara*. He called them *Tiruk-kulattar* which forestalls the term *harijan* invented by Gandhi. When he heard the sultan's daughter gave up her life when the image could not be had by her, he was so much moved that he caused an image of her, to be worshipped in Sri Rangam as the *Tulukka nachiyar* and arranged for a roti food offering there.

Ramanuja considered both Sanskrit Vedanta and the Tamil *Nalayiram* as the *ubhaya Vedanta*. His concept of Tamil as also the Veda continues to this day among the Sri Vaishnavas. Theory and practice merged into one in his case and because of him the Tamil hymns have entered into the social life of the Sri Vaishnavas. His philosophy is known as the *Visishta-advaitam*, a non-dualism with special features. Here there are three entities – *chit*, *achit* and *Isvara*, not One as in pure advaitam. *Prapatti* or absolute surrender is the one keynote of his philosophy and he holds that the one duty of the *jiva* is to dissolve himself in the *kainkarya* (service) of the Lord. Here the *acharya* (preceptor) and the *bhagavata* (man of God) are to be venerated as God Himself.

He admitted all people into his fold with the appropriate rites and kept the door open for all. (But this ideal was given up later by the Sri Vaishnavas and they are the most caste-ridden sect in Tamilnad today.) His great love for the hunter, Villi, and his wife, admission of the harijans into the Melkote temple on the car festival day, his own discipleship under the Vaisya Tirukkachinambi and the instruction of Tirumantram to all-are instances. He was the one person who regulated the worship and the puja rites at Sri Rangam, which are followed in many other temples. He succeeded in making Vaishnavism a parallel, if not a rival, system to the already existing Saiva cult in the whole of Tamilnadu.



## SAINT MEYKANDAR

The system of philosophy of the Tamil peoples of South India and Sri Lanka is the Saiva Siddhanta. This is a theistic system of the same Advaita philosophy which is termed Vedanta. As against the Kevaladvaita system, this calls itself the Suddhadvaita system. The concepts of this philosophy were contained in the songs of Tirumular and Karaikkalammai and of the four Saiva Samaya acharyas, Sambandhar, Appar, Sundarar and Manikka-vacakar, in the earlier periods but it was St. Meykandar who collected and codified the thoughts and gave them shape as a logical system, in the 12th century.

The aphorisms of Meykandar are twelve, in 40 lines having just 216 words. In all the philosophies of the world, there is no one who has given his whole argued philosophy in such a short and compact form. All other systems of Indian philosophy have their original texts in the Sanskrit language. It is only this system, the Saiva Siddhanta that has its original texts in the Tamil language. This would support theories that the Tamils were an autochthonous people, having their own language, culture, religion and philosophy, possibly long before the Aryans entered Bharat.

The story of Meykandar commences even before his birth. Achyuta kalappala, a velala of Pennagadam (South Arcot district) had no children and on the advice of his guru, Sakalagama pandita, who referred to the Devaram songs and came upon a verse of Sambandhar which declares that one who bathed and worshipped Siva at Tiruvenkadu would have all his wishes fulfilled, including the birth of a son. So he asked him to go to Tiru Venkadu, bathe in the three tanks there and worship Siva. Achuta did so and in due time a boy was born to his wife. The boy was brought up in his uncle's house at Tiru Vennainallur and at the age of three a miracle happened. Paranjoti, a sage in the line of spiritual instruction direct from Siva in Kailas, saw this boy and imparted to him the divine instruction and gave him the name *Meykandar*, one who had realized the Truth. The boy grew up, performed a *tapas* in the local Ganapati temple and with His grace was able to enuciate the basic doctrines of Saiva Siddhanta in twelve sutras and name them *Sivajnana bodham*, the knowledge of Sivajnana. Many truth seekers gathered round him and in time Sakalagama Pandita, his father's own guru also came to him. Learning of his course of spiritual instruction, the guru came on his palanquin in order to test what sort of instruction he was imparting. Looking at the seated young man, he asked, "Can you define Anava?"

(*Anava* is in Saiva language the ego and ignorance enveloping the soul, the primordial impurity or bondage.) The young man did not utter any word in reply but just pointed his forefinger at the questioner himself. The learned Pandita realized his folly and immediately fell at the feet of Meykandar and asked to be admitted as his pupil - the teacher a young man of sixteen and the pupil an old man of four score years, as in the case of Dakshinamurti!

'*Sivajnana bodham* given out by Meykandar is in four sections - each section having three sutras under it.

The first section defines the three entities - *Pati* (the Godhead) *pasu* (the bound soul) and *pasa* (the bonds). The next defines their general and special characteristics. The third deals with the means for the soul for freeing itself from bonds and attaining union with the Lord. The last section deals with the released state. The special import of this author's writing is that God, though separate is also an indweller in the soul; the two are different, but one by this concept of indwelling.

Meykandar wrote both *Sivajnana bodham* and 82 illustrative verses therefor and thereby originated a new codification of the advaita philosophy of the scriptures. Many different lines of realized leaders take after him and there are several monasteries dedicated to the spread of his system, later called the Suddha-advaita as against the Kevala-advaita of Sankara. His father's guru Sakalagama Panditta himself became his first disciple in the name of Arulnandi Sivacharya. He has written a large metrical exposition of the master's doctrines in the name of *Sivajnana siddhi* in 335 verses, besides an equally large part being a refutation of earlier alien schools in 306 verses. A study of this text will be very rewarding.

The next important acharya in the line was Saint Umapati who has written a number of Saiva sastras in Tamil and in Sanskrit. After him the spiritual line of Saiva Siddhanta branched off into many schools, each with a large centre of its own and some of them are flourishing to this day. The heads of these institutions had themselves written many treatises in the past.

The writings of Arulnandi and Umapati are not only religious treatises but also fine poetic pieces written in simple but clear and forceful language. They all declare that their philosophy is the essence of all Vedanta.



## VEDANTA DESIKAR

Vedanta Desikar (1268-1369) was the founder of a new sect in Vaishnavism called the Vadakalai (the northern sect). From his early years he was a gifted scholar and poet. He toured the whole of India and everywhere he defeated other sects in philosophical disputation. His successes never went to his head. He was always humble and considered himself the servant of the bhagavatas. He earned the title '*Kavi-Tarkika Simmam*'—lion among poets and logicians. His life story is full of incidents where jealous opponents tried to humble him but he had overcome all their tricks by his own erudition, humility and the grace of Haya griva, the horse-faced form of Vishnu which was his favourite deity.

He gave new life in his day to the Vaishnava sect and from him Vaishnavism branched off into two different directions – the Northern, taking after him with headquarters at Kanchipuram, and the Southern, from his contemporary, Pillai Lokacharya, with headquarters at Sri Rangam. The two sects had some doctrinal differences which the passage of time had only helped to widen. They are today as separated from each other as any two entirely unrelated religions can be. He held that Lakshmi, the Consort of Vishnu, had an important place in the spiritual order as the mediator for the soul in obtaining Vishnu's grace but this was not accepted by the Southern sect.

Vedanta Desika was a towering personality who wrote a hundred manuals in Sanskrit and, very much unlike the general run of the Vaishnava acharyas, wrote also twenty poems in Tamil. He felt that without handling religion through the mother tongue, his new *vadakalai* could have no future. To the northern school of Vaishnavism these have scriptural authority. Some of Desika's poems make good poetry, couched in simple and lyrical language.

Desikar is a common noun meaning preceptor but because of his eminence as a preceptor, it has become his own proper name.

Among his 20 Tamil books some have a relevance here. *Srivaishnava Dināsari* prescribes the daily routine for Vaishnavas. *Ahara niyamam* lays down a food discipline; *Artha panchakam* deals with the Vaishnava five fundamentals - nature of the soul, nature of God, nature of the objectives in life, nature of the means and nature of the deterrent forces. *Gītartha sangraha* gives the essence of the teachings of the Gita. *Prabandha saram* gives the essence of the songs of the Alvar. He held the view that unless one is born a brahmin, he could not attain salvation in that birth and can attain it only by being born a brahmin in a subsequent birth.

## SECTION 7

# ALVAR



## THE VAISHNAVA CANON

The authors of the Vaishnava Canon are called *Alvar*, they who are deeply immersed in the grace and glory of Vishnu (and who will also help to immerse us in that ocean of grace). The Alvar are twelve in number and their period ranges from the 6th century to the 9th.

The songs of the Alvar are collected together and counted as a total of four thousand, and they are known by the name *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* (the four thousand sacred songs). They are in four general sub-divisions of about a thousand verses each. The larger songs of Tirumangai Alvar and of Nammalvar are each over a thousand verses and so they have been grouped into two separate books, the Second, the *Periya Tirumoli* of Tirumangai Alvar and the Fourth, the *Tiruvaymoli* of Nammalvar. Of the other songs, the musical pieces are collected as the first volume, *Mudal Ayiram* (the first thousand), and the non-musical pieces grouped as the third book called *Iyal pa*.

### EARLY ALVAR

The first Alvar (Mudal alvar) were three – Poihai, Bhutam and Pey, and all of them hailed from the Pallava country. These three alvar sang their songs during this period 5–6th centuries. Poy-haiyar was born on a golden lotus in a cool tank in Kanchi. Bhutat-tar was born on a *madhavi* flower (the hiptage creeper) in Kadal mallai (modern Mahabalipuram); and Peyar was born on a crimson lily in a well in Tirumayilai (Madrass); hence they are called *ayonija* (not born from a mother's womb).

A beautiful legend says how they met one dark night in the corridor of a house in Tiruk-Kovalur and how they saw a vision of Tirumal (Vishnu) there and began to sing His praises. As there was not enough space for the three of them they felt squeezed. Poihai used the sun as a lamp and Bhutam used devotion as a lamp, to find out the cause of the squeezing. In the light thus shed, Peyalvar saw the Lord there and began to describe Vishnu whom they saw. They have each sung an *antadi* of 100 *venba* verses, known as the first, second and third *antadis*.

These are the early poems in Vaishnavism and they show a considerable degree of simplicity and religious tolerance, and a wonder and joy, born out of a full and limitless experience of divine grace.

## TIRUP-PANALVAR

Tirup-Panalvar, a bard of the lowest caste in society, was an ardent devotee of Vishnu at Sri Rangam. He used to play his *yaal* instrument on the southern bank of the Kaveri, in praise of the Lord, as a kind of service to Him. The Lord made known the devotion of the low caste Pana by ordering the high caste priest to carry him into the temple on his shoulders. The Pana has sung a short poem of ten verses in praise of the various organs of the physical form of the Lord of Sri Rangam. Mentioning each feature, the poet pours forth his longing for Him in the manner of a girl yearning for her lover. This one song has earned for him alvar-hood.

## TIRU MALISAI ALVAR

Tirumalisai alvar, of the place of that name, on the other hand, is a high caste brahmin and a bigot. He has written two poems, an *antadi* of 100 venbas and *Tiru chanda viruttam* of 120 *viruttam* verses, set in a rigid rhythmic pattern. His works are philosophical in content but the lyrical quality is mostly absent. Some of his verses contain great truths spoken in very simple lucid language in an arresting manner; but the general speed of the jingle and its mechanical rhythm wipe out all poetry from the songs; yet we shall see one verse: "The tides build up even out of the snow-white wide sea; they roll back and merge with the same sea; in like manner, all that are born and that die, and walk and live, out of You, finally are merged in You; such is Your Nature."

## TONDAR ADIPPODI ALVAR

Tondaradippodi (the dust of the feet of God's devotees) has sung two poems, one the *Tiru-pallielucci* and the other *Tiru Malai*. The first consists of ten verses, intended to rouse the Lord from His sleep in the early morning and obtain His grace. *Tiru Malai* means the Holy Garland. The verses show a high degree of violent bigotry and intolerance, and at the same time of intense devotion. According to his biography, his life consisted of extremes and they explain also the extremes in his songs. He makes a complete surrender of himself to God and reveals in the resulting joy. The appeal of the two poems to the Vaishnavas is so great that they are required to recite them daily in their prayers "My Lord of Sri Rangam, I have no place and no land; no kith nor kin. I hold fast unto Thy feet. Thou that art Supreme, of azure hue. I cry out to Thee, O Krishna. Who is my support, other than Thee?"



## KULASEKHARA ALVAR

He was a Sera King of the west coast (8th century). He calls himself the Lord of Kolli (the Sera land), of Kudal (Madurai the Pandiya land), and of Kolli (Uraiyur, the Chola land), but these do not signify much. Yet, the fact that he was a prince, was in those days very significant for the cause of Vaishnavism; here he is the only princely poet in the Canon.

The prince of the Sera dynasty was styled *perumal* (the great person, also an appellation of Vishnu in the modern day) and so he was styled Kulasekharap-perumal and his songs are *Perumal Tirumoli*.

Ruling as a crowned monarch from Kolli, he was deeply affected by the story of Rama; so much so, when the story-teller said that "Rama faced fourteen thousand asuras in battle single handed," Kulasekhara could not remember that this was all a story of the past, but believing that Rama was actually facing the asuras there he marched at the head of his four-fold army to aid Rama in battle. The story-teller gauging the situation immediately continued that "Rama single-handed won the battle and returned victorious", on hearing which Kulasekhara returned with his army.

His deep dedication to the Vaishnava bhaktas even to the neglect of his royal duties, vexed his ministers and they tried to foist a theft on them so that displeasure might be created in the mind of Kulasekhara. But his faith in them was such that swearing that they were not capable of such mean acts he thrust his hand into a pot of serpents to prove their innocence. The serpents did not harm him, thus vindicating his championship of the Vaishnavas. The ministers apologised to him for their false accusation. Unwilling to rule amidst such ungodly people he settled the crown on his son, went to Sri Rangam and spent his days there in the service of the Lord.

His poems are ten, with 105 verses. He was most attracted by the Ramavatara and most of his poems are passionate adoration of this aspect of Vishnu. Like Periyalvar, he is fond of celebrating the childhood of Rama and Krishna and he has sung the first lullaby song in Tamil.

His first three poems are in praise of Sri Rangam. Two poems are on the boyhood of Krishna. In the first, the girls of the Ayarpadi (cowherds' quarters) chide him for being unfaithful to each in turn. The second is the very moving lament of Devaki, the real mother of Krishna who bemoans her own fate in not being

fortunate enough to rejoice in the boyish pranks and feats of the boy, while it was given to Yasoda to witness and rejoice in them.

The lament of Dasaratha after Rama left the city for the forest as instructed by Kaikeyi is one of his best lyrical pieces. The poet really becomes the father and pours forth all the pangs of separation from the son. The *nayaka-nayaki bhava* is frequent in devotional poetry. Periyalvar's role of mother to Krishna in his songs is most unique. But here Kulasekhara's role of father for Rama is equally unparalleled.

The next poem in praise of Tillai Tiruchitrakutam, is a continuous narrative of the entire story of the Ramayana. All the poems of this Alvar prince are supremely lyrical in quality and his songs on Tiruvenkatam and Vittuvakkodu may be said to be unsurpassed in emotional fervour and supplication.

He desires to be born on the Lord's Tiruvenkatam hill in some capacity, so that he may be of some service to Him and may be near Him and enjoy his Lord. "Let me be born as a waterfowl in His tank, as a fish there. Let me be His spittoon there. Let me stand there as His favourite champak tree. I do not care for kingship and the royal ride on the back of the royal elephant; let me stand there as a pillar, a peak, a wild stream, a pathway; let me stay there as a step in the temple and gaze at Him; let me be something there on the hill."

The Vittuvakkodu song contains a proverb in each verse; Even if a mother pushes her child away, it can only cry for her affection and attention; so is the Alvar. The surgeon cuts open a wound with his scalpel though it may pain the patient, yet he has to keep himself attached to the surgeon. The bird on the open seas leaves the masthead on the boat and flies round quite a long distance, but unable to sight land anywhere, it has to return to the boat. Even though the monsoons may fail for a long period, yet the crops have to look to the sky for some rain-bearing cloud. The red lotus will open its petals only for the rays of the sun; the crimson-tongued fire may scorch it, but it will not open.

His supplication to Vishnu is through many directions, as shown above but everywhere he touches an intensely intimate personal note.

For descriptive poetry in the most picturesque and lyrical language, Kulasekhara is a master in the Vaishnava canon. Probably he supplied many thoughts on the Ramayana story to Kambar for his epic composition.



## PERIYALVAR

He was a brahmin of Sri Villiputtur named Vishnu chittan. He had laid out a fine flower garden and was doing the service of weaving the flowers into suitable wreaths. He presented them to the temple to adorn the person of Vishnu enshrined there. Sri Vallabha, the Pandiya ruler of Madurai, had announced the prize of a purse of gold to one who could establish the Supremacy of one God in the presence of other religionists in his court. Under the orders and guidance of the Lord of Sri Villiputtur, Vishnu chittan went to the king's court, established that Vishnu was the Supreme and received the prize of gold. The King honoured him suitably and gave him the title *Bhattar piran* (the Chief of Preceptors).

When Vishnu was taken in a procession along the streets, he had a darsan of the deity and fearing that someone may cast an evil eye on Him, he sang a *pallandu* poem, meaning "may You live long in all this glory." Usually it is the mother who does a ritual to remove the evil eye. Because he did this and because he sang almost all his songs on Krishna, placing himself in the position of his mother, Yasoda, he has been hailed by the grateful Vaishnava community as the *Periya Alvar* (the Elder Alvar).

He returned to his place and continued his floral service. One day he found the child, Kodai (Andal) under a basil plant in his flower garden, brought her up in devotion to Vishnu, and when she grew up gave her away in marriage to Lord Vishnu at Sri Ranganam. As the foster father of Andal, the bride of the Lord, the title of Periyalvar was quite appropriate to him.

Each of the poems of an alvar is generally known as the song or *Tirumoli* (holy word) of that alvar. Periyalvar has sung 473 verses in 45 poems; they are the *Periyalvar Tirumoli*. The first poem is the *pallandu*; the *Nalayiram* (the Vaishnava Canon) quite fittingly opens with the *pallandu*. This poem in 12 verses is required to be recited daily by the Vaishnavas in their prayers.

Most of his songs are devoted to the Krishnavatara; there are also a few addressed to Rāma. His poems give us the most delightful picture of childhood in the Tamil language. Among all divine children the child Krishna has a very large number of lovely stories woven round him. This child and his pranks are the greatest favourites with the Alvar. Alvar was a bachelor; it is astonishing how he has been able to enter into the mind of Yasoda and re-live the childhood days of Krishna in Gokulam. Probably the attention and care with which he attended on the infant Andal

and brought her up to the stage of maidenhood had moulded his own personality and shaped him into a real mother. The wedding of Andal with Ranganatha left him a lonely man. In a song with a personal note, he laments that the girl whom he had brought up had been taken away by Him. Some other whole poems are also in this strain. Having assumed the role of a mother to Andal, it was not difficult for the Alvar to think of Krishna as his child and assume the role of Yasoda who was also a foster mother to Krishna. All these are responsible for the true ring of motherhood in all his poems on the childhood of Krishna.

The celebration of the birth of Krishna in Gokulam is the subject of his first song. Even here he introduces the concept of Divinity in the child. When Yasoda opened the mouth of the child, as is usually done even now, to scrape the tongue of the infant, she saw all the seven worlds in the open mouth. This vision is vouchsafed to Yasoda, according to the purana, some years later but the Alvar introduces it here in a very natural and artless manner.

All the other songs follow in this form, artless and natural, yet full of wonder. Yasoda treats her child quite in a natural manner as a mother would, but in the songs the Alvar's wonder is transferred to her. The beauty of His form, the Child in the cradle and the lullaby song, the address to the moon, the lisping of words, the clapping of hands, the toddling walk, the embrace, frightening of the child in a playful and affectionate manner, the ear-boring, invitation to the crow to get a stick for the baby to play with, decking with flowers and many other little acts related to the child, are the subject matter of his poetry. Yasoda calls to the child to go to her for breastfeeding but yet she is afraid to feed him because now she has seen his other pranks with the gopi girls in the Gokulam. All other devotional literature teems with instances of the poet becoming mentally the lady-love and pining for the love of the Lord. But Periyalvar really becoming the mother is the most unique feature in all literature.

His songs are some of the greatest poetry, not only in the Vaishnava Canon but in all literature. As contributions to Tamil literature, his songs are the first in many respects. His is the first *pallandu* poem; his *pillai-Tamil* motifs have helped the evolution of the poem as a type of literary composition in later years; his *talattu* along with Kulasekhara's is the first lullaby, giving rise to a vast wealth of such literature in the next thousand years.



## ANDAL

Andal, the only woman poet among the alvar, is the adopted daughter of Periyalvar. He found her as a baby in his flower garden, and the man who was a confirmed bachelor brought up this girl, as a mother would have. When she came of age, she refused to think of a mortal for a bridegroom. She decked herself as Krishna's bride. She even put on the garlands intended for Him, to see if she were a suitable bride in such decking for the Lord and replaced the rolls of wreaths in his flower basket. However he happened to see this one day and scolded her for defiling the floral wreaths intended for God and did not offer them for the Lord that day. But the Lord told him in a dream that only the wreaths worn by her were the most pleasing to Him. Naturally he was much amazed and was anxious about a bridegroom for such a girl. But when he described to her the glories of all the forms of Vishnu enshrined in the different places she chose Sri Ranganatha enshrined at Sri Ranganam for her bridegroom and her life ends with the marriage and her blissful union with her Lord at Sri Ranganam.

Her songs numbering in all 173 verses form *Tiruppavai* and *Nacciyar Tirumoli*. *Tiruppavai* seems to have been taken from a popular theme of the period where girls go in groups to a river or tank for a bath and pray for the succour of their patron deity. Here Andal as a small girl calls upon her companions to wake up and go with her, singing the praise of the Lord Krishna and seeking His grace on themselves in order to get good food, good cows and milk, good dress and even good husbands, and ultimately asking Him to take all of them, of the ayar clan, as His servants for ever and ever. *Tiruppavai* is a household word in the Vaishnava community, recited by them daily, particularly in the month of Marhali. *Pavaip-pattu* seems to have enjoyed immense popularity not only in Tamilnad but in overseas territories also; it is said to be the occasion for a national festival in distant Siam (Thailand) where it had travelled during the days of the Chola conquests and got absorbed in popular lore.

Verse 25 of *Tiruppavai* may be quoted here:

“Oh Lord, Thou wert born as the son of one and,  
Thou didst conceal Thyself as the son of another.  
Thou didst defeat the wicked intentions of Kamsa,  
Who could not brook the thwarting of his will.  
Thou wert like fire, scorching his entrails;

We have come to Thee with love  
Seeking Thy grace. Grant us this;  
We shall sing Thy wealth and valour,  
And shall be happy, freed from grief."

These songs are sung by Andal who has now really assumed the role of a gopi.

It is certainly the ethereal and other-worldly longing of a love-sick damsel pining for the love of her lover. The the meis not wholly religious; it is partly religious and partly playful; Krishna is not merely the Supreme Being, the Transcendental One, but also the Immanent One, who can be a playmate and comrade. Many songs in Periyalvar and one in Kulasekhara are to be studied in the background of Krishna's *krida*. The words spoken are set in a dramatic situation, and are placed in the lips of unlettered and unsophisticated *ayar* children. If we remember these three elements, namely, the immanence of Krishna, the drama, and the children of the *ayar* clan, the poem can never appear to be anything other than real children's prayers.

Her other songs are equally valuable. Her Tirumoli opens with a worship of Manmata the god of love, but the narration of her dream-wedding with her Lord is the most important and the most lyrical, of all her poems. The poem has got absorbed into the rituals of all the Vaishnava communities; it is even today sung at their wedding ceremonies. This is a beautiful lyric, narrating the details of the marriage ceremony. All the parts of the function are so graphically described by her that reading them, we even forget ourselves and imagine that we are actually in the midst of such a ceremony. The Vaishnavas are really fortunate to have such a poem. We can go on choosing such poems and introducing them - her address to the conch, to the clouds, flowers and birds. Two of the songs are on the traditional *aham* model.

Andal's total surrender to God has virtually compelled, if we may say so, the choice of the soul by God to shower His Grace and Love on it. All her songs are songs of intense rapture born of contemplation and meditation and then absorption in the beauty of God. In her poems, the whole gamut of sensory, erotic and mental emotions with vital and spiritual feelings and longings inter-penetrate in a manner that a heightened condition of mystic union is presented before us in the form of poetry. The poetic creativity presents a vision of a supreme spiritual union, which is enhanced by the quality of her own sweet music, in which she easily excels all other singers.



## TIRUMANGAI ALVAR

Tirumangai alvar is one of the two alvar who have sung a large number of verses and on a large number of Vishnu shrines (86). The *Periya Tirumoli* or the second thousand in the *Nalayiram* is composed entirely of his songs. Besides this, there are three important poems of his in the *Iyalpa*. Generally a picturesque and dramatic setting is given to the lives of the alvar and the story of Tirumangai is certainly the most picturesque of them all.

He was a *kallar* (robber clan) chief of Mangai in Tiruvalinadu, near modern Sikali in Tanjavur district. He married Kumudavalli and at her instance began feeding thousands of *bhagavata* devotees of Bhagavan (Vishnu) daily. When he ran short of funds, he took to highway robbery. To test him, Vishnu with his Consort, appeared on the road as a newly wedded bridegroom and bride. Tirumangai removed all the jewels on the person of the two, but unable to remove the rings on His toes, he applied his teeth to them. When even this failed, he asked the bridegroom, "Have you cast a spell (mantra) over these?" He said yes, and whispered into Tirumangai's ear the eight mystic syllables (*ashtakshara*) special to Vishnu. Immediately the erstwhile robber came under the influence of the Lord and straightway burst into song. The first song itself is very famous; it describes the learning of the Lord's name by the Alvar and the conferment of all good thereby.

The total of his songs is 1253 verses. He has toured the entire Tamilnad. Quite contrary to tradition, his writings show considerable scholarship. His *Tiru Elukurrirukkai*, like Sambandha's before him, has a very intricate number arrangement which only a good scholar could have mastered. He has sung two *madal* poems, the smaller one and the larger one. The *madal* is a theme from the sangham poetry; there it is the male who threatens to ride the *madal*, the palmyrah horse, out of a determination to give up his life through unrequited love; but here it is the woman, who had however, been strictly prohibited from doing so, according to the sangham tradition.

His *Periya Tirumoli* contains, besides *Tirumoli*, two beautiful poems, *Tiruk-Kuruntandakam* and *Tiru Neduntandakam*. The first, a short one of 20 verses, is modelled on *Tiru Nerisai* of the Saiva saint, Appar, with shorter lines, and the second, a longer one of 30 verses, is modelled on *Tirut-Tandakam* of Appar, with longer lines. The latter poem being longer in each line, has an easy flow of the subject; particularly in its verses 11 – 30, which are on the *aham* theme, the long drawn sound effect, the subject and the

music, all together confer on the poem a quaint and sensitive touch.

But by far the greatest work is of course his *Tirumoli*. The opening song is the one he sang when he came directly under the influence of his Master, Vishnu; it is an outburst of ecstatic delight on being taught the Lord's name as a mystic *mantra*. The same delight in the name is expressed by him elsewhere too. One poem on Tiruvenkatam prays to the Lord fervently to accept him, in spite of his many imperfections, (beginning *Taye tandai enrum*, 1028). It is a very moving and haunting song. Like all the saintly singers every where, he says here that he has committed all sins; he cries that he is now surrendering himself to the feet of Venkatesa and prays to Him to receive him and bestow His grace.

Another poem enumerates the occasions when He (as Rama) gave refuge to humble folk like Guha and prays that he also be accepted. Speaking of the Tiru Naraiyur shrine, he says that this temple on a raised base was built by Koccengat Chola, who had already built seventy similar temples for Siva. The entire poem is remarkable for the great praise showered by the Alvar on the Chola. One poem here on *sappani* (asking the infant child to clap his hands) is on the *pillai Tamil* pattern of Per yalvar. Another poem of short lines is in the form of an entreaty by a love-sick maiden to the birds and other animals to call on the Lord to arrive here; it is on the model of Appar's *Tiru Angamalai* and is a delight to children; this is a poem on the love theme, most sensitive and poignant – verses beginning “Tiruttay sempotte”. There is also a *saalal* poem, a song of game for girls, which might have been a model for Manikkavacakar's song of the same name; similar is also the *kottumbi* poem.

Considering the poems as a whole, one cannot but be impressed by their literary achievement. There may not be great philosophical content in the songs, but their literary relish and their appeal as *aham* poems are immense. The appeal of childhood seems to be a favourite theme with all the Vaishnava poets, because of the immense scope for the portrayal of the Lord as the lovely child, Krishna; our alvar is no exception.

Almost all his verses, seem to echo words, phrases, thoughts and patterns of the Saiva Nayanmar. This Alvar lived in the days of the Pallava Emperor Danti Varman (775-825 A.D.). His songs are easy and pleasant, with a remarkable literary flavour. Acharya Parasara bhattar has annotated one verse of his longer Tandakam.



## NAMMALVAR

The story of Nammalvar is briefly told. He was the son of Kari of Tirukkuruhur in the extreme south of Tamilnadu. Though he was born through the special grace of Vishnu, he kept dumb. His parents placed him under the *puli* tree (tamarind, the *sthala vruksha* of the temple at Tirukkuruhur). The child would not see anyone except Him, and would not speak with any one. Sixteen years passed. Madhura kavi came there directed by a divine light, and to him the alvar opened his eyes and deigned to speak. It is said that the forms of Vishnu enshrined in the various temples in Tamilnad and beyond appeared before the alvar and he sang his songs on them.

He has sung four poems, *Tiru viruttam*, *Tiru Asiriyam*, *Periya Tiru Antadi* and *Tiru Vaymoli*, giving out the substance of the four vedas, Rig, Yajus, Atharva and Sama veda respectively. His poems are known among the Vaishnavas as the Fifth Veda. His very name, Nammalvar, shows the endearment he had among them (*Nammalvar* – our alvar). He is the last of the alvar and the first of the acharyas (spiritual preceptors). Nathamuni is said to have taken instruction directly under him, not personally but by revelation, and continued the spiritual line going on through Alavandar and Ramanuja.

The first three poems contain 100, 7 and 87 verses respectively. They are grouped under *Iyalpa*. But his reputation rests on the last, *Tiru Vaymoli* (sacred utterances), which runs to 1102 verses. All the verses are in a single *antadi* arrangement; the legend that all the forms of Vishnu in the various temples appeared before him to receive a song from him is understandable, from the fact of this *antadi* arrangement.

*Tiruvaymoli* is said to contain the essence of the philosophy of Vaishnavism, and that is said to be its greatness. It is the one basic scripture for Vaishnavism, much more than even the Vedas. Later preceptors and writers have extracted all their metaphysical and philosophical concepts from this book. The Vaishnavas derive great satisfaction in giving it a Sanskrit name such as the *Dramido-panishad*, *Dravida veda sagaram* and *Dravida brahma gita*.

His *Tiru viruttam* deals with love themes on the model of the earlier sangham *aham* poetry, on the religious plane. It sings of the soul's determination to break the fetters which bind it to matter, and expresses its yearning for union with God.

This alvar's poetry enshrines the highest spiritual wisdom of the Vaishnava cult and in this respect he occupies the same exalted

position that Manikkavacakar occupies in Saivism. As poetry, *Tiruvaymoli* is considered to be heart-melting poetry, giving us the quintessence of divine experience. His is not mere wisdom: it is a blend of wisdom, emotion, surrender and realisation. He has the god-vision in an extraordinary measure. All his senses perceive only God; it is always a direct realisation through absolute surrender. He often expresses this realisation in emotion-charged love lyrics. He addresses the world and gives out his message of love and hope, of surrender and joy in service. Attunement to the Divine Will liberates one even here, in this birth.

Many of his songs on the love theme are supremely poetic. There are indeed inspired poetic writing and brilliant flashes when he lays bare the inmost recesses of the heart pining for the love of the Lord. "Art thou not mine own little *myna*? I had prayed to Thee to convey my all-consuming love to God, but thou didst not. I have now become weak and helpless through pining after Him. Thou mayst go even now and find someone who can feed thee as lovingly as I had done" (so that I may pass away without any anxiety for thy future welfare). What a poignant and intimate affection even towards a pet, born out of the intense love for God!

Poetic tradition in the Tamil language has been of a very high standard. There have been many alvar whose poems had conformed to those standards. Many of the poems of this alvar also, following the love theme, hail in that tradition as great poetry. If tradition regarding his early life is to be credited, one cannot but marvel at the life-experience and love-experience which find expression in his songs. When one attains a spiritual oneness with the All-pervasive Being, an awareness of all experiences - spiritual, physical or emotional - accrues.

*Tiruvaymoli* is an intimate record of the spiritual experiences of the great mystic, Nammalvar. The mystic experience is not a continuous one but interrupted by moments of withdrawal of the illumination granted to him. These are also reflected in the songs. God dwells in the body and in the soul and this gives a fulness and richness of experience which is beyond words but yet the Alvar is struggling to express that experience. In expressing it, he is concerned with man and his upliftment and that is the purpose of all divine songs. The entire *Tiruvaymoli* is an expression of God experience, quite well deserving of the like "the Fifth Veda" conferred on it.



## THE OTHERS

Madhura Kavi, the last of the alvar, is remembered as the devotee who discovered Nammalvar. It is remarkable that he has been raised to *alvar-hood*, though he has not sung a single line on Vishnu, his ten verses are on his master, Nammalvar; he even says that he knows no other god than Nammalvar. Yet such has been the discerning devotion of the Vaishnavas that his short poem forms part of their daily prayer book.

It may be well here to make just a reference to some of the great ahcaryas in the long line of preceptors before and after Ramanuja in Vaishnavism. It was Nathamunihal who, from a chance song sung by two Vaishnava pilgrims in his village temple, came to know of the existence of the 4000 divine songs, *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* (they had then gone into obscurity), journeyed to the birth place of Nammalvar, and by his grace obtained the songs and gave them a new life by getting them sung to music by his two nephews. He is hailed as the Acharya second in line to Nammalvar himself. Alavandar his grandson was the next great acharya. Both of them had written their expositions on Vaishnavism only in Sanskrit.

The next great preceptor was Ramanujar. . He also did not write a single word of Tamil. He commissioned his pupil Pillan to write a commentary on Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli*, which he did. It is fully in Sanskrit with a few Tamil words thrown in. Sometime later Nanjiyar wrote another more elaborate commentary. His disciple Nampillai had been responsible for many commentaries on all the *Nalayiram* songs. Periyavaachan pillai his pupil wrote a remarkable commentary on all the *Nalayiram*, and he is hailed as the Emperor among commentary writers. Nampillai's own exposition known as the *Idu* is the largest on *Tiruvaymoli* and it sets the seal on all future writing in the Vaishnava canon.

After Nampillai, Vaishnavism branches into its two sects. Vedanta desikar heading the Northern and Pillai Lokacharyar heading the Southern sects. Lokacharya's brother Alagiya Manavalaperumal and some time later Manavala mamunihal have done remarkable service for the cause of the *Tenkalai* Vaishnavism.

SECTION 8

SAINTS AND SEERS



## KANNAPPAR

Kannappar was the son of the chief of a hunter clan. His father sent him into the woods on his maiden hunt. Following a boar he became thirsty and his comrade took him to a hill, saying that they might worship the hill-god there. Mounting the steps the young man felt an unusual elation and with every step he realised a great and overwhelming joy. Sighting the Sivalinga there, he ran to it, hugged it and shed tears of joy. He learnt from his comrade that a priest used to go there every day, bathe the linga with water, deck it with flowers, offer it food and thus perform worship. The young man desired to do a similar worship.

Going down hill, he cooked the meat from the boar he had killed, in a small fire, biting it to see if it was well-cooked, brought a mouthful of water for the Lord's bath, taking flowers on his own hair, carrying the cooked meat on one hand and his bow and arrows on the other.

He moved the earlier flowers on the Lord's head with his shod foot, bathed the linga with water from his mouth and offered flowers and food. He kept a vigil by the side of the linga the whole night. The next morning he went out in search of food for the Lord. The priest came there in the day and finding there a total desecration through shoe-prints and meat strewn about, he cried his heart out and complained to the Lord. The Lord declared to the priest: "Know that the whole of this hunter's form is devotion fo Us: all his knowledge is knowledge of Us: all his actions are pleasing to Us: Know his state to be this" and bade him wait in concealment and see the next day the expression of the hunter's devotion.

When the hunter returned, he saw blood ooze out of the left eye of the linga. He plucked out his own eye, applied it (an eye transplant of the modern day!) and the flow stopped. The Lord wished to test him further. The right eye now oozed blood. Placing his foot on the head of the linga, to know the exact position the hunter applied the arrow to his other eye. The Lord could Bear no more. A hand shot out of the linga and caught his arm saying, "Stop, Kannappa". He is since known as Kannappa. Surrender to God similar to this had never been known.

Kannappar is one of the canonized saints, about whom St. Manikkavacakar says in his *Tiruvacakam*, "O Lord, I do not possess love like Kannappan's."

## CHANDESAR

The life of Chandesa is important for the Saivas. He was born in a brahmin family, was found unfit to study, and so was given, at his own request, the work of tending cows. Under his loving care, they thrived well and gave an enormous quantity of milk. He used the surplus milk for bathing a Sivalinga which he made out of sand near the grazing meadows on the banks of the River Manniyaru. Rumours were afloat that he was wasting good milk and so his father set out to discover the truth. He actually saw his son bathing the sand-linga with milk and enraged at what he saw, he kicked the milk pot. The young boy deeply immersed in his worship, saw the hindrance caused to his worship, took a stick lying near by and slashed the offender's foot with it, cutting it into two. Siva was much pleased at the single-minded devotion of the young boy and raised him to the celestial sphere to be a leader of His forces. Today in Saiva worship, personal or congregational, Chandesa puja is the last item and, without it, the puja is not complete. Only the *darsan* of Chandesar will confer all the benefits of Siva puja.

## NANDANAR

He was a harijan (untouchable) in Tiruppongur, supplying the Siva temple with skin for the temple drum and strings for the stringed instruments. He was of an extremely pious disposition. He desired to have *darsan* of the Sivalinga in the sanctum, but the bull mount of Siva was obstructing the line of vision. Knowing his desire, Siva ordered it to move aside. The stone bull did so and Nanda had a darsan to his heart's content. Even today the bull could be seen in the temple to have moved a little to the north.

He again desired to go to Chidambaram to witness the Cosmic Dance of Nataraja in the temple. He went on postponing his trip, making excuses. His farm work had to be done. This Lord Siva did for him even without his asking. Finally he started, crossed the Kollidam river and reached the city. He was praying that he might be enabled to have a vision of the Dance. The Lord obliged. He ordered the priests of the temple to purify Nanda in a bath of fire and take him in. They did so. When he neared the sanctum, his heart beat with the greatest ecstasy and with folded hands he went in and attained final beatitude. He is one of the 63 canonized Saints of Saivism. His story is a thrilling one of how through intense devotion a low caste humble man came to be respected as a saint by all the high caste people.



## TIRUMULAR

Tirumular has sung 3000 verses which are collected into the Saiva Canon as the Tenth Book. His songs are called *Tiru Mantram*; the term *mantram* will indicate the great reverence and spiritual value attached to his writing. He is one of the 63 canonized saints in Saivism and his story is sung in 66 verses by Sekkilar.

His story is partially clothed in legend. But the legend itself is a manifestation of the philosophy expounded by him. Himself a highly evolved soul, he was passing through the more important places of pilgrimage in India, when he finally decided to settle down for penance on the banks of the Kaveri. At Avaduturai, a village in Tanjavur district, he saw a herd of cattle, bellowing in great distress and grief over the body of its kind master and cowherd, who died while tending the grazing herd. The pilgrim was much moved by the distress of the dumb animals and, to satisfy them, he left his own body and migrated into that of the dead man, who was known as Mulan. When Mulan came back to life, the herd was immensely happy and, as it was already dark, returned home in the usual manner. Seeing that Mulan did not return with the cows, his wife came to him to the river banks to invite him home. But the new Mulan (or Tirumular as we shall now call him) was of the other world and would have no truck with her or with the world either. She left him in despair. Tirumular sat there in meditation for years and opened his eyes once a year to write down in song a thought which had come to him in the course of the year. Thus he wrote about 3,000 songs, each song arising out of his rich inner mystic experience of the Cosmic Self, till the time of his union with the Lord, on a day in October-November.

We know that Tirumular actually lived in the present Tanjavur district in the 5th century A.D. Some of the most mystic utterances and most sublime spiritual experiences find expression in his songs. His utterances laid the foundation for a distinctive system of philosophy and a characteristic practice of religion which came later to be called the Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy and which is very much alive today, governing the life and conduct of more than forty million Tamilians here and elsewhere.

The teaching of Tirumular can be summarised in the single word – LOVE. "God is ONE and all life is ONE. The Beyond is immaterial. Do you strive to live the Life Eternal, here in the Present." "Let me share my blissful experiences with the world" says he. "The ignorant say that Love and Siva (God) are different. They do not know that Love is God. If they know, then this life

will be one ceaseless Love." Like the two sides of the coin Love and Truth are the two aspects of the same Being and Tirumular and Gandhiji each emphasized one aspect thereof.

"Give, Give, Give. Don't discriminate. Feed the poor. Do not amass property. Look at the crow, which calls its entire flock when there is any morsel available."

"Life on earth is so easy, so simple, and is within the reach of anyone. Just a petal to worship the Lord with; just a blade of grass to feed the cow with; a morsel of food to the hungry; and a kind word to the afflicted: who cannot afford these?"

An unnatural philosophy of negation had been gaining ground in Tamil nad. The Jain and Buddhist influence was undermining the Tamil culture with its emphasis on the transience of life, riches, even this body, and had used words of great contempt on the body itself. Into this world of negation and gloom, Tirumular turns his great light of wisdom which says that the body is to be cherished.

"Formerly I had thought the physical body is something to be shunned. But within it I see the glow of the Lord. Hence now I cherish it as the seat of Him. If the body perishes, the soul also goes. Then there is no question of bliss or salvation. Hence, know how to cherish the body well and cherish it. It will in turn cherish the Soul." Verily a strange statement indeed from a *yogi* who is supposed to teach you to flee this life! Yet in his contempt for the littleness of the things of this world, he by far surpasses the profoundest ascetics and cynics. "Life is transient" he says: "The couple ate their food and entered the bridal chamber. The groom complained of a little pain on his left (the heart). He laid himself down to rest and rested for ever!"

But this is not the best of his own natural self. It is of a more heartening and exhilarating type:

"Oh Friend, thou art thy foe, as well as thy own friend. Thou maketh this life and the one beyond. Thou art the creator of the fruits of thy actions and thou art the enjoyer thereof. Thou art the master of thy own destiny." "There is only one God for the universe. That is the Life and the Soul of the universe. That is Siva; just taste it, Oh, it will be ever so sweet!"

In Tirumular, the Tamil race has produced a marvellous combination of the deepest religious ecstasy and the most simple and practical way of life: To extend Love to all Life, to see God in all Life, and to achieve harmonious union with it.



## KARAIKKAL AMMAI

Women in ancient times were able to transcend all social barriers. One such was Karaikkal Ammai, a canonised Saint of the 5th century.

She was born as Punitavati (the pure girl) in a deeply religious merchant family. From her childhood, she was of a religious temperament, devoted also to men of God. She was married to a rich young merchant, Paramadatta, and was leading a quiet domestic life, enriched by devotion. One fine morning, she had to face a crisis which, in its wake, brought on miracles.

One day her husband sent home two mango fruits given to him by a client. A mendicant came to her house for food. Rice had been prepared, but no side dish. She very naturally gave away one mango to the guest, in lieu of a side dish, along with rice. After some time, Datta came home and was having his lunch. She served him the second mango. Finding it quite good, he asked for the other.

Punitavati and Datta were a loving couple and we might expect that he would naturally allow one mango for his wife's lunch. Perhaps a fit of gluttony came over him, when he demanded the second mango also for himself.

Non-plussed, the poor girl stepped into the larder, as though to do his bidding. His unusual gluttony made her forget herself. She could easily have told him that the mango was given away. She forgot to do so. She prayed, "O Lord, what shall I do! My husband wants the second mango also! If I do not present it, he may suspect me!" Her prayer was answered and a mango appeared on her uplifted hands. She served this to Datta. Finding this unusually delicious, he grew suspicious and by patient questioning, elicited the truth from her. To test her statement, he ordered her to get him another mango from the heavens. The poor girl was now in real distress. Out of the depths of her heart, she prayed to God to rescue her from the plight and it was God's will that she have another mango. When Datta touched it, it vanished.

The poor man was awe-struck. He believed that Punitavati was some celestial being, in the guise of a wife. He concealed his awe and kept cool and normal. After a few days' stay in the home, he loaded his ship with cargo, put out to sea and disappeared. He crossed the seas to distant lands, and after a good trade there returned finally and settled down in the city of Madurai unknown to his people. He married again and had a daughter, whom he

named Punitavati after his wife at Karaikkal.

In due course, news of Datta came to her people. Anxious to re-unite her with Datta, they took her to Madurai. He met them with his second wife and child, and prostrated before her saying, "My friends, this is no human being. This is an Angel from the heavens to whom you should also do homage."

This was something abnormal. In the Hindu family, the husband is the overlord, entitled to obeisance from his wife; he never fell at the feet of his wife. The young wife, Punitavati, was much discomfited. When her husband behaved in this manner, her ideas of re-union and home were shattered. She prayed to God to take away her physical frame and give her the form of a ghost.

In the form of a ghost, she left the place and, full of a religious frenzy to have a vision of God, went to Mount Kailas, His celestial abode. As she was ascending the steps on her head, the Heavenly Father greeted her with the words, "Welcome, Mother!"

Thus this poor young woman became the mother for the Heavenly Father, who has no father and no mother, and who is Himself the Father and the Mother for all creation.

She was promised eternal rest at Tiru-Alankadu, a shrine near Madras. She went there and was praying to the Lord until she attained eternal rest at His feet.

This lady thence forward came to be known as "the Mother from Karaikkal." She had poured forth her joy at the vision of the heavenly Father and ecstasy on the experience of His grace, into fine musical verses. 143 of her verses are now available. They form part of the rich legacy of devotional literature in the Tamil language.

Her lyrics are the natural and soulful outpourings of an extremely joyous but simple being which had a blissful experience of divine manifestation. The songs are simple. She is the forerunner of a new cult of the Tamils, which is an advance on all previous concepts of God, man and matter. Her thoughts are responsible in a large measure for the evolution of the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy from the seventh century onwards.

We shall be content here with just referring to a few thoughts from Karaikkal Ammai.

"It is He that perceives, that makes me perceive, and is the instrument of perception, and also the objects perceived." "It is Grace that rules the world, Grace that liberates me from bonds, and Grace through which I perceive the Truth. I am therefore in harmony with all things in the Universe."



## SEKKILAR

*Periya puranam*, the great book of the Saiva Saints on an epic pattern was composed in the heyday of the Chola dynasty by Sekkilar, a minister under Emperor Kulottunga II (1133-50). The story is that, as a young ruler, the king had been studying the Jain epic, *Chintamani* (written in the 9th century by the Jain writer, Tirut-Takka Devar). His minister, Sekkilar, pointed out to him that as a ruler coming of a Saiva ruling dynasty, it was unbecoming on his part to study a sensuous poem of a heterodox religion. The king asked Sekkilar to give him an equally fine Saiva epic poem and *Periya puranam* was the outcome. The *purana* is a Book of Saiva Saints or Saiva hagiology written as an epic in 4286 verses. It is *Periya* or great not because of its size but because of the subject which is the "stories of the Men of God." Saiva tradition is that godly men are to be revered even more than God Himself and this *Tondar puranam* (lives of the servants of God) came to be called by a discerning posterity as *Periya* (the Great) *Puranam*. In a later day it has been grouped as the Twelfth Book of the Saiva canon. Its one keynote is *bhakti*, devotion and surrender to Siva and viewed in this light, it is seen to be a marvellous achievement. Its verses are always elegant and graceful, simple and fluent, yet charged with the finest emotion. The author has here set out to sing the glory of the devotion of the men of God, whom St. Sundarar (c. 700 A.D.) mentioned in his poem, *Tirut - Tondat - tohai* and he has not deviated from Sundarar.

The work is, in a sense, the national epic of the Tamil people, because it treats of the lives of the devotees of Siva who had lived in all the different parts of the Tamilnad at different classes of society, men and women, high and low, educated and unlettered. We have among the saints crowned monarchs from all the ruling dynasties of the land, as well as men from the harijan classes, but they are all portrayed as equal in their devotion to God and godly men. Sekkilar transcends the limits of time and space and comprises within the folds of his spiritual democracy even people who lived earlier and who will be living hereafter, not only in Tamilnad but in all the distant climes: men who had lived outside the Siva fold are also included as in the case of the Buddhist, Sakkiyar.

Most of the Saints have to pass through an ordeal where their devotion is put to the severest test, but every one of them emerges out of it victorious. Nothing is impossible for the devotee.

Sacrifice of all earthly possessions is nothing; he sacrifices his wife, his child, himself: his eyes he plucks out, fights with his own kith and kin, he does not hesitate to punish even the king's wife when she smells the flowers intended for God. Devotion to God's emblems is so intense that when he sees the sacred ash on the person of his adversary in combat he allows himself to be slain rather than fight with a devotee. When a Chola prince finds the matted head (the emblem of Siva) of a soldier on the battle field, he gives up his own life for the sin of having caused the death of such a soldier. Women also share such sacrifices as equal partners. Including the three Devaram singers, the Puranam mentions the lives of seven poets who are also servants of God.

Written by a minister of the Chola state when Chola supremacy was at its highest, the poem is not only one of intense devotion, but also one of great majesty and real grandeur, the like of which we rarely meet with in all the wide range of Tamil epic poetry.

Sekkilar seems to have forgotten the king when he plunged into the narration, because here he does not worry about any artistry in composition. He is carried away only by intense devotion and his fine sensibilities make him unfold deeply spiritual values. Most apparent in the large book are two elements – the remarkably high and independent status given to women and Sekkilar's own devotion to the Chola dynasty.

In short, Sekkilar's large work is a grand garland of fragrant flowers (stories) for the Lord strung together with the string of deep devotion. It reaches the heights of sublimity in many places such as in the story of Anayar, of Kannappar, of Meypporul, of Enadinathar and of Karaikkal ammai.

We see in his writing the great importance which Agama cult of temple worship is assuming under the Chola patronage.

The large book is in the nature of a great epic and is the first *purana* in Tamil. Naturally all later works take after it. Sekkilar is a great patriot who sang equally on Tondainad, the land of his birth, and the Cholanad where he was minister. Yet he gives considerable material of historical value from the whole of Tamil nad. The keynote of his narration appears to be veracity, intense devotion and surrender.



## PATTINATTAR

Tamil literary history gives us two great philosophers bearing the same name, Pattinattar, he of the city (Kaverippattinam). The first of the two was a classical poet of the 10-11th century who has contributed five felicitous songs to the 11th Book of the Saiva canon. His songs are couched in the most powerful language, full of imagery and herein he expresses a great delight and firm assurance of God's acceptance of his service and of his own final attainment of bliss.

The second Pattinattar of the 14th century is the more popular one. He brought the highest spiritual wisdom and its emotional flight in both polished and rugged poetry to the level of the so-called masses. Till recently, there was no mendicant beggar or wandering minstrel who did not sing a dozen of his verses to the accompaniment of an one-stringed self-made harp. The content of the song, the attunement of the minstrel, and his rugged harp blended, strangely enough, harmoniously with the rural setting.

He was a merchant prince of the city with no child. His favourite deity desired to fulfil his desire for a child and came to him as a child. The boy grew up and even took charge of his father's shipping trade and brought, in his ships, vast wealth from across the seas. Thus when Pattinattar was at the height of worldly joy and pride, this young son disappeared, sending his father, a palm leaf scroll with an eyeless needle; on the scroll was written "even an eyeless needle will not go with you on your last journey."

This was the turning point in the merchant prince's life. It was enough to spark off the divine glow latent in his heart. He ordered his minister to give away all his wealth and property to the poor, and immediately renounced on the spot, everything – wife and kin, riches and possessions and, with just a loin cloth round his waist, left his home, never to return. The minister accordingly gave away the vast wealth of his master as directed.

Pattinattar then wandered through the land, only in the loin cloth, visiting shrines and lastly reached the shrine of Tiru Otriyur at the northern limits of modern Madras. He stayed there for a long time playing with little children tending cattle near the sea-shore. He was a very genial playmate for them and they enjoyed his company. One day he knew his end was near. He asked the boys to cover him with a large earthen urn. They did so. When they came and took it out the next morning, he was there no more; he had left this mortal coil and entered into his eternal Samadhi.

He speaks in detail about his own person, about the physical comforts the human body may need, and the simple manner in which they can be met. A begging bowl, a rag to cover the body with – these are enough for him. The name of the Lord is there for an inward utterance and meditation, and His devotees are there for company. Again and again he says that a loin cloth is enough for dress; the outer yard of any house for laying the body down to sleep; some fruits and green leaves to appease the hunger, water to drink; the name of the Lord for company and protection: ‘What other care do I have in this world?’

“The ascetic who has renounced the world is a million times superior to the householder, who leads a righteous life; he who is unattached in the mind is a thousand million times superior to that ascetic; but he who has overcome all evil through his superior knowledge and remains unaffected by *karma*, good or evil, oh how can I describe his glory?”

Pattinattar is a poet of the masses. Most of his songs have become household words among certain classes of people. The philosophy of Pattinattar is not difficult of comprehension to the simple mind and no scholarship or learning in the scriptures is required to understand him; mere life experience will suffice. He says that “a handful of rice obtained for the mere asking from any house; a piece of rag to serve as a loin cloth; and a little shade in the outer yard of any house to lay himself down for the night - these will be enough to satisfy the animal needs of the body.” But what about the needs of the spirit? They are also equally simple for him. “Subdue the ego, take refuge at His feet, cultivate the company of godly men, and utter His name in your mind - these are enough to bring unto you the greatest spiritual wealth.” Real beggars, that is, beggars without any real attachment in life, find a genuine echo of their own life and thought in his songs. Hence his songs have the greatest attraction for them as the song of no other poet has ever had.

Pattinattar brought religions, ceremonials, worship and philosophy to the level of the unlettered man in the street and that is his greatest contribution to mankind. Says he: “Our place is Tiru Alan-kadu, the shrine of the Cosmic Dancer, Nataraja. We have with us the begging bowl given by Him; it is inexhaustible. There are the benevolent people to give us all that we ask. Who can equal us?” In the revered list of poets who have shown to man the simple pathway of self-denial and surrender to God, Pattinattar occupies an honoured place, between Manikkavacakar and Tayumanavar.



## SIDDHAR POETS

Too much of ritualism in Tamilnad arising in the Chola period and a little later had caused a revolt in orthodoxy resulting in the evolution of the Siddhar. The term siddhar means a realised soul. A vast volume of siddha-writing is available and it is remarkable that it introduces both a high philosophy and new forms of poetic composition into the language. Unfortunately, the orthodox Tamil scholars treated siddha poetry with scant respect and so it fell into undesirable hands and its development gathered into itself considerable spurious material.

Siddhar writing has rich mystic poetry and it relates mostly to the period 14-16 centuries. Probably, the jolt given to Hindu complacency by the impact of muslim attack on Madurai gave rise to the siddha seers. We are concerned here with Siddha poetry. We shall ignore pseudo-Siddhar who deal with medicine, alchemy, transmigration and so on.

The Saiva acharyas always speak about *bakthar* and siddhar, the devotee and the seer and so the siddhar are not outside the fold. The siddhar are not atheists. They believe in God and emphatically declare their faith in the one God whom they name Siva. They do decry idol-worship. Their view is that the Lord is to be realised in the heart and that for one who has no such realisation, all external worship merely degenerates into blind idolatry. This is the thought that is indeed at the core of all Siva worship and is not peculiar to the Siddhar. If we scan the *mantras* uttered, we shall perceive that the worship offered is not to the idol, but to the One Beyond which is incomprehensible and for which the idol is merely a symbol.

The Siddhar is to be taken as a kind of *jivan mukta* who has had a complete realization and who sings of his realization not only in good poetic form but in a harsh and uncompromising form. He is content to live on in this world as an ordinary mortal among the other mortals till his fixed life span is over and till his *prarabda karma* is spent.

A tradition would say that the Siddhar number 18 but there is no basis for this. We have only a few real siddhar who have written good poetry. The others have not written poetry and are just pseudo-siddhar. Again others are fond of equating the siddhar with the Natha cult of the north. This is hardly tenable. Some would call Arunagirinatha also a siddhar in the natha cult, because his name is a natha. This is not to be taken seriously.

The term *navanatha siddhar* is also met with frequently but the names given there have nothing to do with Tamil *siddhar* poets. Some would go even further and say that some of the important temples like Palani are sepulchral temples dedicated to some *siddhar*. This is also a fib of the imagination and unauthentic.

If we brush aside the mention of Agastiyar, Tirumular and Arunagiri nathar as *siddhar* and also ignore the claims of the later *siddhar* who deal with medicine and alchemy, we are left with quite a sizable volume of *siddhar* poetry. The highlights of this poetry are Sivavakya, Pattinattar, Kudambai, Agappey, Pambaatti, Aluguni, Idaikkader, Kaduveli, Konkanar and Karuvoorar. The *Siddhar* are usually Saiva *siddhar*; the last two mentioned are Sakta *siddhar*. There are no Vaishnava *siddhar*.

The main characteristic of the *siddhar* is their revolt against Vedic Brahminism. They hold that rituals are not necessary for the worship of the Omnipresent Universal Self as these tend to restrict His All-pervasiveness. Sacrifices and *puranas* are ridiculed. They condemn them in positive terms. The birth preference is a hindrance to individual as well as social progress. All are equal in God's creation. Again how can God manifest Himself in a man-made piece of stone or metal when man is unable to see Him in his own heart? Of what avail can mere flower and mere mantras be when the heart has not melted, has not had any realisation? The *Ashtama siddhis* do not make one a *siddhar*.

Sivavakya has sung over 500 verses in a traditional manner using very harsh language. He was probably the child of a brahmin and a harijan woman. Pambaatti, Ahappey, Aluguni, Idaikkadu and Kaduveli had given the Tamil language new forms of poetic composition which have been copied by later poets. Subrahmanya Bharati owes not a little to their forms. Avvai of Jnanakural could have been a woman *siddhar*. We do not know the real names of the other *siddhar*, but remember them only by some words or forms in their poetry.

The Sakta *siddhar* mentioned above always offer worship to Sakti as *Bala* a young girl of ten years. They indicate the possible existence of the Sakta cult in some rare pockets of Tamilnad.

The *Siddhar* have helped the Tamil race to re-examine its religion and re-assess values at a critical period in its political evolution namely the impact of Muslim invasions and the conversions at the point of the sword.



## ARUNAGIRI NATHAR

When the heaviest gloom darkened the lives of all the Tamilian people, in the shape of Muslim attack on Hinduism and of destruction of its temples and institutions, there arose in the religious firmament a new star that shed its divine light into the darkest corners bringing illumination and joy, hope and courage, rejoicing and confidence. That star is Saint Arunagirinathar, known to every family in the whole of Tamilnad. His life story which is a mere legend, is not much. The grace of Muruha reformed him from his immoral early life and gave him the supreme gift of poesy. His *Tiruppuhal* songs (1360 available out of a legendary 16000) have made him a master of lilting verses which when sung musically still endear him to everyone, irrespective of sex, age, caste or creed. Words arrayed in rhyme and alliteration in every foot, with an easy lilting rhythm, flow from him in an unimaginable torrent. He has sung all his songs on Muruha and they were a panacea for all the ills the people suffered through the alien onslaught. People sang his songs in congregational music in the temples and in the streets and experienced a divine joy which transported them to realms of the greatest ecstasy. He has exhausted all the *talas* laid down in musical treatises, not through any definite exercise but through a divine or intuitive prompting. People now resorted to temple worship with renewed vigour and dedication.

There was Sanskrit proliferation not only in temple rituals but in the Tamil language itself and we find in this author, who was capable of the power-laden use of Tamil, Sanskrit also being employed equally felicitously along with Tamil. Modern critics say that by his profuse of Sanskrit he has tarnished the purity of the Tamil language. Far from it. The influence of Sanskrit had been there from very early times but Tamil had not lost its native force, beauty and genius. Sanskrit with Arunagiri comes in as an elegant and resourceful handmaid lending added power, charm and fluency to the language. The mechanical rhythm and lilt of the Tamil language is made easy and fast-moving by the use of Sanskrit words. The adaptability of the Sanskrit words in two forms, *tatsama*, loan words in unaltered form, and *tatbhava*, loan words in altered form, has helped considerably in the rhyme and rhythm. But this profusion of Sanskrit in the poetic works was a feature which disappeared with this author and had not been followed by any other.

All the songs are set to music and from the days of the author, people in large numbers have been singing them in set tunes to the

accompaniment of the beating of resonant cymbals held in the hands. The songs have swayed large congregations of the masses as perhaps no other songs had done. People young and old, men and women, learned or illiterate, rich or poor, sang his songs in chorus and no other force in the history of Tamilnad had unified the people and held them spell-bound for hours as these songs had done. Even today at the voice of a master, these songs achieve the same integration, a sort of song democracy which transcends even creed. There have been a few imitators of *Tiruppuhal* in Vaishnavism etc. but all these have no soul in their poetry and have not touched the hearts of the people; they evoke only our academic interest.

Apart from the rhythm and the song quality of the poems which are indeed of a superior poetic value it is the philosophy of Arunagiri that has captured the heart of the people all through the five centuries after him. His philosophy is the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy slightly modified to suit his Muruha concept. He gives here equal importance to the *Panchakshra* (the mystic five syllables of Siva) as he gives to the *Shadakshara* (the mystic six syllables of Muruha). He states he has enjoyed a vision of Muruha and this is enough for him to enjoy everlasting peace and bliss to the end of his life. He holds that God is everything - all things perceived and all those inferred and that He is of the *Pranava* form. He is both Form and Formless. He believes that the souls and the bonds exist apart from God and that it is His grace that directs the soul and finally enables it to sever its bonds.

His God is of the form of Supreme Intelligence and Joy. His philosophy is an implicit faith in the mercy of God, in dedicated service to humanity with complete surrender to Him.

His *Kandar alankaram*, in 106 verses, is a much simpler poem, breathing courage and hope to all mortals. The faith in God voiced here will make even the most despondent go through life bravely, and confidently meet any challenges in life. There is no poem in the language which will infuse faith and courage in young children as firmly as *Kandar alankaram*. It is mostly in very simple language and many of its verses laugh at Death. *Kandar arubhuti*, a short poem of 51 short quatrains is the essence of his mystic experience. These two smaller poems are as popular as *Tiruppuhal* itself.

Apart from devotion and surrender, the one message emphasized by him in all his writings, is giving and feeding the hungry.



## GURU JNANASAMBANDHAR

He was the founder of the Saiva monastery at Dharmapuram near Mayuram on the banks of the Kaveri in the later half of the 17th century. Born at Sri Villiputtur in Ramanathapuram district, he was given the name of Jnanasambandha, the great boy saint of Sikali in the 7th century. He went along with his parents to Madurai. Worshipping in the temple of Sakti Minakshi and Lord Sundaresa, he was enveloped in Siva's grace and when his parents desired to take him along with them to their place, he declined to go with them saying that he wanted to be with his spiritual parents in the temple.

The austere disciplines and Siva puja of the devotees there were after his own heart and he very much desired to perform a similar puja to a personal God even like the others there. Bathing in the temple tank, he obtained a Sivalinga there, delivered into his hands by the Grace of God. He prayed to Sundaresa to grant him a true guru to teach him Siva puja. The Lord told him in a dream to go to Tiru Arur where he could meet his guru.

Accordingly Jnanasambandhar went to Tiru Arur. Meanwhile, the Lord had also instructed Kamalai Jnanaprakasar, an enlightened preceptor at Tiru Arur to wait for Jnanasambandhar and give him the necessary knowledge. As he was sitting in the temple there one day, Jnanasambandhar came to him and fell at his feet. Jnanaprakasar remembered his dream, took Jnanasambandhar as his disciple and gradually taught him not only Siva puja but also all spiritual knowledge that would qualify him to be a spiritual head.

A miracle happened one night which revealed to Jnanaprakasar the advanced spiritual condition of this new disciple. Jnanasambandhar was living with his master as his favourite disciple and followed him to the temple and back from worship, along with the other disciples. It so happened that as they were all returning one day from the temple at a late hour in the night, the torch-bearer who used to light Jnanasambandhar's way back home had fallen asleep. Jnanasambandhar noticed this and immediately took up the torch and lighted the way for Jnanaprakasar. As soon as they reached his home, he said 'stay' as usual and went in. This was a signal for the disciples to disperse and for the torch-bearer to go home. The other disciples went away but Jnanasambandhar the new torch-bearer this night thought that his master had simply ordered him to stay there and so stayed on at the entrance the whole night, without a wink of sleep.

A miracle happened in the night to show to the world the great devotion of Jnanasambandhar. There was a heavy downpour of rain, but not a single drop fell on Jnanasambandhar or on the ground around him and the torch continued to burn the whole night without oil. Jnanaprakasa's wife opened the door and came out at daybreak to clean the front yard and saw a strange spectacle. The new disciple was standing there with a lighted torch in his hand, while all around rain water had been flowing on the ground but not a single drop had touched him. She ran in and informed her husband. He came out and saw the strange spectacle. He rushed to the disciple and embraced him with the words: "Jnanasambandha, you have now become fully realised. I see you have a mission in life. Go to Dharmapuram near Mayuram and there establish a monastery and with the help of disciples who go to you propagate the true Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. You shall hereafter be Guru Jnanasambandhar."

Unable to disobey this command, this young man went to Dharmapuram and there founded the monastery which is still flourishing in the place, being governed by a succession of religious disciples who had maintained the spiritual line unbroken.

Guru Jnanasambadhar had once a call to go to Chidambaram. He accordingly went and had the unique distinction of being given food by the presiding Sakti, at a time when he awoke from his *samadhi* and felt hungry. In due course he attained final *samadhi*, appointing a suitable disciple as the next head.

It was under the fourth head Pontiff in this line that St. Kumara guruparar got his initiation, before going to Banaras. The tenth Pontiff had visited Banaras and staying there for some period, had sung fine devotional verses on Lord Siva there as Visvanatha, on Sakti Annapurani and on many other deities.

A disciple under the Pontiff went to Mysore and when asked by the ruler there how the disciples of Dharmapuram had enjoyed themselves, replied him in the following fine words:

"They study the significance of the three entities –  
*Pati, pasu, and pasa*; after having studied them,  
 Discard the pleasures of life.  
 Then they cease from the worries of all learning,  
 And immerse themselves in the bliss of Sivananda,  
 They, the true disciples of Jnanaprakasar."



## SAINT KUMARAGURUPARAR

Kumaraguruparar (c. 1628 – 1688 A.D.), one of the great God-inspired poets of the period was born dumb in Srivaikuntham in Tirunelveli district in the extreme south of Tamilnad, of Shanmukha Sikhamanik-kavirayar and his wife, Sivakamasundari. However through the Grace of Lord Muruha enshrined in the celebrated shrine of Tiru-Chendur nearby to which presence he was taken by his parents at the age of five, he attained the power of speech and immediately burst into poetry singing *Kandar Kalivenba*, a long continuous poem in 122 couplets.

This poem has three significant features: one, it gives the tenets of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy succinctly in the first 65 couplets and then the ten insignia of royalty in the next 9 couplets; two, the full story of Skanda in 35 couplets; and three, the prayer of the child for protection, proficiency in Tamil and for bestowal of grace, in the last 13 couplets. This is a poem of daily prayer among many people in the land.

Growing up, he made a tour of the Saiva shrines in the locality and in due time reached Madurai, then ruled by Tirumalai Nayak (1623 – 1659). He sang there *Minakshi ammai pillait-Tamil*, a fine poem on Sakti Minakshi, enshrined in the famous temple in the city. Nayak arranged for the publication of the poem in his court. As Gurupara was reciting and expounding the verses, Sakti Minakshi came there as the little daughter of the temple priest and sitting on the lap of the ruler when the 61st verse was being expounded, took the pearl necklace from his shoulders, placed it on Gurupara and disappeared. Everyone now realised that Gurupara was the favoured devotee of Sakti. Naturally he was much honoured. The poem fondles the Divine Being as a small child and each section of the poem deals with the child from its third month onwards, in odd months to the 21st month, highlighting the traits of the child in its varied stages of natural growth through these months. All the metrical and poetic devices are employed here by the poet in a charmingly simple language with a cadence and diction which raise it to the heights of the finest lyric poetry. Kumaragurupara has a rare gift for coining meaningful happy expressions and these have since become the common stock of all poets of the later day. Many of the verses have a mechanical rhythm or lilt and this naturally has endeared them to the Tamil scholar and the common man. Besides, Sakti Minakshi is the Mother, the Mother of all the universe, and this concept

along with the music and the lyricism of the subject has given this poem the first rank among all Pillait-Tamil poetry.

Then he sang *Madurai-kalambakam* in 100 verses in praise of Lord Siva in the shine and at the request of Nayak condensed the thoughts of *Tirukkural* in a fine poem of 100 *venba* verses called *Niti neri vilakkam* (Light on the Ethical Path).

Going to Tiru Arur, he composed *Tiru Arur Nanmani malai* in 40 verses in four metres on Siva there and proceeding north reached the Dharmapuram monastery situated near Mayuram. In the presence of the Head Pontiff there he realized that he was his spiritual preceptor. His mind was bent upon renunciation. At the behest of the master he went to Chidambaram to witness the Cosmic Dance of Nataraja. Staying there for some time, he composed two poems on Nataraja.

Returning to Dharmapuram, he composed *Pandaramum-manikkovai* in 30 verses in praise of the master, was admitted to the holy orders and again at the behest of his master went to Banaras. Those were hard days when Muhammedan invasion, aggression and conversion were rampant and it was no easy matter for a *sadhu* to walk all the 1500 miles to Banaras. Dara Shuko, the spiritually inclined son of Shah Jehan, was holding a Parliament of Religions there at the time. Reaching the city, Gurupara prayed to Sarasvati for mastery in Hindustani the court language, through a song of 10 verses entitled *Sakalakala Vallimalai*, became a master of the language and there expounded the philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta learnt by him at Dharmapuram so well that Dara Shuko was much impressed. He presented him with vast areas in the city for building a math and for propagating his own religion. Gurupara did accordingly and the great math which he built there continues to this day discharging its functions under the control of his spiritual descendants. He reopened the Kedaram temple there and rebuilt it on the Tamilnad temple model and it still continues as a model of Tamil nad temple and worship. Gurupara passed away at the ripe age of sixty in May 1688. Many in the history of Tamil Literature have been child poets and this poet is one of them, endowed with divine gifts of poesy by his favourite deity.

In the history of India, though many savants had gone to the north carrying their philosophical propaganda, they had not established Tamilian institutions. But in St. Kumaragurupara we see a cultural invasion of Banaras, the most sacred city of the Hindus, by Tamil monk from the South and the effect of the impact continues to the present day in the form of a Tamilnad institution.



## TAYUMANAVAR

He bears the name of Siva enshrined in the Rock-fort shrine at Tiruchirappalli where the Lord Siva Himself appeared as the mother of a young woman to attend on her child-birth and from that day earned this name. The poet (1705 – 1742) was born in a *velala* family of Vedaranyam. Deeply learned, he had the gift of poesy. Early in his life he was a minister under the Nayak ruler at Tiruchirappalli. Being of a religious bent of mind, he came under the influence of Mouna swami, a spiritual preceptor from whom he learnt the message of Silence. He gave up his post and when his wife died early in life, he became a sannyasi and touring several places, reached Ramanathapuram where he attained *Samadhi*.

His is a mature and sober mind which sees God in everything around and hesitates even to pluck a flower for worship, because it sees God in the flower. He unwaveringly preached the modern 'one-world' concept, that mankind is one, philosophies and God are one. He is a profound scholar but has no use for scholarship and higher philosophy in his scheme of the values of life, in his preparation therefor, and in the struggle to attain his goal of a universal vision and oneness with the all-pervasive One. He has no use for the body and the pleasures of the senses but he does not heap abuses on them, as many others had done. He always offers his mind as the sacrifice, at the altar of the temple the heart, his love as the holy bathing water; his spirit is the food *neivedya*, his intellect the incense and lamp; the deity is the God of Peace. He always seeks to effect an external harmony of the various sects like the Vedanta, the Siddhanta and the Siddha, as well as an internal harmony of love to God and to all creation. He preaches also a philosophy of compassion; he enjoins man to look on every being as God Himself and give it the love he would give to God.

Tayumanavar was a great master in the use of Sanskrit words and although he uses a large volume of Sanskrit words occasionally, the use is not oppressive; there is force and vigour, and a directness, simplicity and aptness which make us forget the language and melt in their meaning. Tayumanavar preaches a higher philosophy, which soars higher than rituals and temple worship, and he will have the greatest appeal for the thinking mind, be it unlettered or highly learned, for all time.

## MEYPPORUL NAYANAR

He was a ruler of a part of modern South Arcot district, who had a special reverence for the emblems of Siva. Muttanathan coveted his kingdom but unable to defeat Meypporul in open battle, resorted to a ruse.

Knowing his absolute surrender to the emblems of Siva such as the sacred ash, Muttanathan one day donned the dress of a Siva bhakta with a profuse smearing of the sacred ash on his forehead and person. He bundled up a sharp dagger as a packet of palm leaf manuscript, and went to the palace of the prince. "I have come here to teach you a new Agama of the Lord" said he. Meypporul seated him on a pedestal and bowed before him in salutation. Muttanathan drew out the dagger and stabbed him fatally, Datta, the bodyguard, rushed in but the falling prince stopped him with the words: "Datta, our friend", and holding back his ebbing life through sheer force of will, he ordered: "See this bhakta comes to no harm and drop him outside our kingdom." Datta did so. Meypporul exclaimed "Who can perform the fine service thou hast done!" and gave up his life. This is a marvellous story of a man of God, who showed the greatest mercy on his own murderer.

## ENADI NATHAR

He was a Siva bhakta who had specialized in sword fight and was chief. He was particularly attached to the sacred ash, an emblem of Siva. Another expert Atisura was envious of the leadership of Enadinathar. He fought with Enadinatha several times but every time met with defeat. His base nature devised a means to do away with Enadi. He called Enadi for a single combat. Enadi agreed. Atisura smeared the ash liberally on his forehead and arrayed for the combat, he met Enadi and opened the fight, completely concealing his ash-smeared face with his shield. Enadi was on him in a minute and was about to slash him down, when sensing the impending end, Atisura lowered his shield and revealed his ash-smeared face. Enadi saw the ash and shook with a great remorse, saying, "How could I fight with this ash-covered Siva bhakta?" With these words he dropped his sword and shield. As Atisura raised his sword Enadi again thought, "It is a sin to kill an unarmed person. Let not that sin attach to Atisura". Thinking thus he resumed the sword and shield as though he were fighting. Atisura needless to say killed him immediately. But Enadi gave up his life smilingly, happy in the thought that the Siva bhakta did not strike down an unarmed person.



## SERAMAN PERUMAL

Seraman Perumal was a ruling prince of the sera country in the west coast. He had set his heart on the worship of the sacred ash, Siva's emblem. One day he happened to see the palace washerman carrying a bundle of soda earth on his head. The wet earth that dripped and covered his body had dried up in the sun and he presented a form completely swathed in the white sacred ash. The Prince passing by on his elephant mount saw him. The sight reminded him of the ash-covered body of Siva. Jumping down, he fell at the feet of the washerman with the words "I am Sera, your humble servant." What can the astounded washerman do? The Prince was helped to acquire the friendship of Saint Sundarar and in time when Sundarar went to Kailas from the Prince's capital city, he also followed him through the practice of yoga. This prince Seraman has sung three devotional poems which are included in the eleventh book of Saiva canon. One of the three is *Jnana ula*, the first *ula* poem in the Tamil language.

## SENDANAR

There was a harijan wood-cutter in Chidambaram who eked out his livelihood through this means. It was his practice to give some food to a mendicant before his lunch. One rainy day, he was unable to cut much wood and get any rice. He got a little ragi, a kind of inferior millet with which he made a porridge for his lunch. He found a mendicant (who was Lord Nataraja Himself, intent upon making the poor man's devotion known to the public) who ate the gruel with relish and carried away all the remnants in Sendan's pot for his next meal! Sendan went without any food. The next morning the temple priest opening the temple found the ugly gruel strewn all over the sanctum and on the person of Nataraja Himself. He made this desecration known to the king. Nobody could find out the culprit. Nataraja appeared in the anxious king's dream and told him that the gruel came from his partaking of Senda's lunch. But yet nobody could find out who Sendan was. However, the next morning, the car festival day, when a large mass of people tugged at the ropes of the car, it would not budge. Just then, a Voice from the heavens said, "Senda, sing a *Pallandu*". The poor Sendan who was also tugging at the ropes now found himself singled out for song. Poesy was granted to him and he burst forth into the *pallandu* song. Naturally he became known. Sendan, has sung three other musical pieces in the 9th Book of the Saiva canon.

## RAMALINGAR

Ramalingar, coming a little more than a hundred years after Tayumanavar, holds up the banner of compassion and has given his life to that philosophy. In the long history of devotion among the Saiva fold which includes such illustrious names as Appar, Manikkavacakar, Arunagirinathar and Tayumanavar, Ramalingar does have a place: but he does not follow in the footsteps of the first three but follows in the footsteps of Tayumanavar. His doctrine of compassion and of the good life are the direct legacy of Tayumanavar. His concept of the one-world embraces within its fold not only mankind but also the animal and the vegetable kingdoms. He had seen in his day poverty and hunger all around him and he believed with Gandhi that God appears before the hungry in the shape of bread. Among all the god-inspired souls, he is the one who also founded institutions for poor feeding.

His complete poetical works comprise more than 6000 verses, sung mostly on Siva and the visitation of Siva's grace on himself from the early days to the day of his passing away. The greatest element of Ramalinga's devotional poetry is an absolute simplicity in the language, the presentation and the very conception of the out-pourings. Though the author was a learned soul, he had in actual life only the companionship of the most illiterate people who were attracted to him when he cured some ailments through the practice of medicine which the unlettered mob considered to be through superhuman intervention. This element of adoration from the masses on the merely physical plane however brought about a frustration in life to the author. This apart, he will go down to posterity on three main considerations – his simplicity of language as shown above, his employment of the bridal mysticism and the use of novel kirttana forms, and his employment of prose for a large part of his writing. His musical pieces are quite charming and have been popular to this day.

Unlike his poetry, his prose is not simple. It is in long drawn sentences heavily laden with metaphors, similes and proverbs, which although familiar, make the reading anything but inspiring. His philosophical bent is not quite refreshing, although he strikes out a new path and does not follow the classical path of the *Nayanmar*. In spite of all its defects, the poetry of Ramalingar will continue to be the great poetry of the common man.



## SEMBIYAN MA DEVI

Sembiyan madevi was the Queen of Gandaraditta Chola (950-957) who adorned the Imperial Chola throne for a short period. She was married to the Prince by 920 and lived until 1001 A.D., the 16th year of Raja raja I. Her benefactions to the cause of Saivism in the land are so vast that she deserves to be called a saint, the Unsung Royal Saint.

Gandaraditta was of a saintly disposition and had himself sung a song of ten verses on Lord Nataraja and it is included in the Tiruvisai-ppa collection as the 20th peom. From an young princess, she became the Queen of the Empire when Gandaraditta ascended the throne. Even as an young woman she was of a religious disposition and her first act as a new entrant into the Chola household was to create an endowment for the lighting of lamps in the Tiruk-Karkkudi temple. Her complete biography has been recast from the inscriptions of the period.

On the death of her husband, she did not claim the throne for her infant son but placed Gandaraditta's younger brother on the throne and on his death, his son Sundara Chola. These grateful Cholas had given her the administration of the temples in the land. At the period, Rajaraja had an elder brother who was the heir apparent, and so with no expectation of the throne, Rajaraja (son of Sundara Chola) was brought up by the grandaunt Sembiyan madevi in the palace. Her company and training had made his mind temple-oriented. He was so attached to her that when his own father died and the people wanted him to ascend the throne which was his natural right, he said "No, let Uttama Chola, the son born of the sacred womb of our grand aunt the gem of our race ascend the throne." Sacrifice such as this equalling only the sacrifice of Bhishma had never been heard of in history. Rajaraja stepped the throne in 985 on the death of Uttama Chola.

Rajaraja had the legacy of great heroism handed down to him by the line of the Imperial Cholas and the legacy of temple culture handed down to him by Semliyan madevi in temple construction, administration and maintenance. She had constructed more than ten temples in stone and endowed more temples with articles for worship. He accompanied her on all her tours of temples as an young prince and this influenced him into becoming a great temple builder. If we are to name one person who was responsible for all the temples in our land, the finger should point unhesitatingly to Sembiyan madevi who moulded the prince, later the Emperor Rajaraja.

SECTION 9  
LITERATURE



## THE TAMIL LANGUAGE

Tamil is the oldest of the living (i.e. spoken) languages of the world. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1969 edition), "The Tamil language is one of the principal Dravidian languages spoken in South India and perhaps the only example of an ancient classical tongue which has survived as a spoken language for more than 2500 years with its basic structure almost unchanged."

Research scholars in the Dravidian languages have not been able to identify the Tamil race with any one race so far classified by them nor have they been able to fix any area as the original home of this race. Their location ranges from Finland in the northernmost part of Europe to Australia in the southernmost part of the world where traces of Tamil contact have been discovered. Consequently they have labelled the Tamils as "a mystery people of the world." There is no mystery if it is conceded at the outset that they do belong to Peninsular India.

The remarks of Dr. Gilbert Slater in this regard may be quoted here with advantage. "We have here a language system, structurally entirely alien to the Indo-Germanic languages, one which belongs to a more ancient type of language; for the study of inflections in the Indo-Germanic languages shows that these are the degenerate remains of separable additions to roots or stems, and in Tamil such linguistic decay has not taken place. The fact that the present day spoken and literary Tamil perpetuated a much more ancient stage in the evolution of language than that represented by even the most ancient Sanskrit seems to suggest that the Tamil language became fixed in its literary character at an extraordinarily ancient date, and points to an extraordinarily ancient Dravidic civilization" (Sir Ashutosh Mukerjee Silver Jubilee volume).

Of the two forms spoken and written, the written form is the standard form which generally does not change much, because here the language had been developed fully and standardized for more than three millennia and successive grammatical treatises have contributed to the fixity of the structure. Within limits the language has a flexibility which enables the spoken form always to refer back to the written or standard form and this element has through all the centuries imposed a restraint on the spoken form so that it does not have a very marked variance with the written form.

The earliest book on the Tamil language and literature is considered to be *Tolkappiyam*. Ignoring many fantastic claims for its date as some thousand years before Christ, we may be factually correct if we assume that its date was somewhere between

500 B.C. and 300 B.C. That Tolkappiyar postulates many linguistic theories and discusses at length the subject matter of poetry, poetics, rhetoric and the like and says that the thoughts were expressed by earlier grammarians, signifies that the language and literature were in a highly developed state long before him. The only language which can claim to have a very ancient past, as ancient as that claimed for Sanskrit, is Tamil. All the north Indian languages of today branched off from Prakrit, the spoken form of Sanskrit, much later in point of time. The three main South Indian languages, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam branched off probably from a parent stock long after Tamil. Malayalam branched off directly from Tamil, less than a thousand years ago. Local variations and the proportion of the admixture of Sanskrit are responsible for the variations in these languages.

Sanskrit influence has pervaded the Tamil country even in the days of *Tolkappiyam*, in which also its influences are traceable. The Tamil language possesses more effective vowels and a lesser number of consonants. The latter may perhaps be inadequate to express some aspirated and softened sounds as in Sanskrit, but they had proved quite adequate to express Tamil sounds and thoughts. The language of the days of *Tolkappiyam* and days earlier had proved through the centuries adequate enough to express all thoughts which the Tamilian thinker had the need to think and express. In short, the Tamil language had enough vitality, depth and width to stand on its own, along with any ancient living language of the world, with the power of expressing the most subtle thoughts of the human mind. Technology is something new to every language and terms are invented in the stride of science. Such terms can also be absorbed and adapted here and also invented in the Tamil language as occasion demands.

A large admixture of Sanskrit words found its way into the spoken and the written language by the 11th century A.D. through the exponents of the Vaishnava philosophy and later by those of the Jain school. Muslim invasions and the British domination had their own share in infiltrating foreign words and forms into the language. But Tamil has absorbed them all and still today marches ahead without, in any way, losing any part of its native genius and vitality. The Tamil language is an agglutinative language; case endings for nouns and verbal inflexions for tense, place, gender and number are added on to the root, which remains almost the same. Syntax has not changed.



## TOLKAPPIYAM

The book takes its name from the author Tolkappiyar. The title means the ancient classic; this is the most ancient piece of writing in Tamil available today. Its date is pre-third century B.C. It is a grammatical treatise; and so naturally it was preceded by centuries of a rich heritage of literary output and tradition. *Tolkappiyam* lays down rules for different types of poetic composition; these rules were, of course, extacted from books which existed earlier than the author.

Tolkappiyam treats of only *iyal*-Tamil. It is divided into three books-*eluttu* (orthography), *sol* (etymology) and *porul* (subject matter). The entire book was original and the author's own, in classification, conception and elaboration. Each of the books contains nine chapters and presumably was planned as such. *Tolkappiyam* clearly indicates that its author was familiar with the Sanskrit rules on grammar. He has made rules in his book for absorbing Sanskrit words.

The first book deals with letters. The classes of the letters, the place of the letters, the place of origin of sounds, and the coalescence of letters when words come together, form the subject of the nine sections of this book. The definition of the units of sound for the various types of letters in this book is a valuable contribution on this subject.

The second book deals with words. Its nine sections deal with the class of words (denoting higher or lower beings or things), gender, and conventions, case and their import, exceptions, the vocative case in particular, then words of action, the particles and adjectives and adverbs; the last section hereof deals with the four kinds of words - the common or natural words, borrowed words, indigenous literary words and words of Sanskrit origin, and their significance. He mentions the Sen-Tamil territory as twelve; these are not clearly known now. The three ruling dynasties are also referred to. Tolkappiyar confined borrowed words to the twelve regional territories; later the author of *Nannul* added the traditional eighteen territories also (excluding the Sen-Tamil territory).

The third book is *Porul-adhikaram*. Of its nine sections five deal with *aham*, one with *puram*, one each with similes, prosody and idioms. The Tamilian convention of classifying geographical regions as the four - *kurinji*, *mullai*, *marutam* and *neital*, and specifying the people who live there, their general pursuits, the seasons and the daily hours which are special to each region, the

emotion of love that is most applicable to each, tutelary deities – starts from *Tolkappiyam*. The author does not consider *palai* – the desert region – as the fifth region; its classification as the fifth has been adopted much later. Though he held the regions as only four, he held the conventional conduct in love poetry, *tinai*, to be five. Along with these five, *aintinai*, he added two more, one-sided love (*kaikkilai*) and improper love (*perumtinai*). This classification has been adopted by later writers and no one has bettered it. The regions and the conventional conduct in the love theme is symbolized by five flowers – *kurinji* the hills, *mullai* the forest, *marutam* the plains, *neital* the sea coast and *palai* the desert. The themes associated with these are: *kurinji* union of the lovers; *mullai* – separation; *marutam* – patient waiting under separation; *neital* – waiting on account of separation; and *palai* the woes of separation. *Tolkappiyam* gives the themes and their elaboration only as isolated or stray topics but later books string them together into a continuous narrative.

Just as *aham* means a house, a domestic life, its external counterpart is *puram*, mostly war in the past. The activities connected with war are also grouped into seven categories or *tinai*. War generally commences with the aggressor marching into enemy's country and seizing his herds of cows. The cows and some similar objects are not to be hurt in war, and so this preventive action. Flowers are always associated with the war activities. Eight flowers are mentioned. The raiding forces which capture the herds wear the *vetchi* (*iixora*) flowers, and so on. Corresponding to the laurel which is a symbol of victory, we have here the *vahai* (*albizzia*).

The other chapters of the book deal with prosody, literary convention, similes and expression of emotion.

The chapter on *marapu* is important. It records many literary conventions for posterity. Many of them have passed out of use but yet it has helped in the evolution of the later *nighantu* (lexicon) writing. It is not easy to recapture all the thoughts recorded in an analytical treatise of a thousand years ago, when the continuity is broken or forgotten. But the first commentator, Ilampuranar, has done this for *Tolkappiyam* by his commentary written a thousand years after the original. His commentary on the three books is fully available. It was the basis for many later commentaries. These writers open out for us as it were magic fields of enchanting life and thought, language and literature, the richness and variety of which the Tamils could not have even dreamed of but for them.



## TAMIL LITERATURE

Poetic form had been the expression of all literature in Tamil from the earliest times. All books were written in verse. Manuals of grammar, peculiar to only a few languages like Sanskrit and Tamil, were all written in verse. Not only that; any matter that was worthwhile was penned down in verse. Lexicons, medical books, astrological manuals, mathematics, architectural treatises and many others were written down in verse.

The earliest types of verse were four, but two of them somehow fell into disuse – the *vanjippa* and the *kalippa*; only the *venba* and the *asiriyappa* continue from the earliest period to this day. Many variations in the metre occurred of course over the centuries. Popular songs required still greater variations and the language was elastic enough to accommodate all such variations.

Early Tamil literature was classified as *aham* (pertaining to love themes) and *puram* (other themes) but such a classification gradually fell into disuse. The entire poetry of the Sangham age falls into this classification. But some centuries later, the two get dovetailed. Similarly also the idea of the five natural regions *kurinji*, *mullai*, *marutam*, *neidal* and *palai* generally pertaining to the love themes of earlier poetry, gets intermingled. We hear of *mut-Tamil*, dealing with literary Tamil, music and drama (*iyal*, *isai* and *natakam*) but only the first category has been handed down to us in a continuous stream: *isai* had a chequered course through history, while drama seems to have been almost snubbed out, even at the very commencement of Tamil literary history. Grammars which originally dealt with orthography, etymology and topics of poetry, later on took on prosody and poetics, and rhetoric as separate branches.

The beginnings of Tamil literature were only stray and occasional verses; continuous or connected verses were rare. Ethical dictums were coined by many writers but they were all in the nature of only isolated verses. There are some long poems among them such as the various *atruppadais*, which are narratives within a limited range; but here each is one single complete poem, not a string of verses. There have been group poems like the *Kalittohai*, but here also the group is not a continuous narrative; each verse in the group is an isolated verse. *Silappadhikaram* is the first continuous narrative poem: it is in the *asiruiyam* metre followed by two others in the same metre, which very soon gave place to the more elastic, moving and melodious *viruttam* metre. The *viruttam* was a copy from the Saiva and Vaishnava canon, where the metre was em-

ployed in strings of continuous verses often 10 or 11, constituting a poem in praise of a shrine. A large volume of ethical dictum was coined by many poets during the period between the Sangham poetry and the later epic poetry, in the *venba* metre. All of them were in the nature of isolated verses in the *venba* metre, which by now had to compete with the *viruttam* for popularity. Of course the *viruttam* won, because of its movement, harmony of sound, regular measured feet, and the mechanical aids of rhyme, alliteration and assonance. They were relatively freer than the *venba* and more loose. The place secured by the *viruttam* during the days of the rise of the epic continues to be occupied by it to this day.

During this period, there was Imperial rule in the land and royal patronage was available to many writers. When the Imperial dynasties died out, continuous long narratives gave place to shorter minor poems of diverse character in praise of God or man. Men of letters turned their attention from original writing to the writing of glosses on grammatical treatises, on epic poetry, ethical works and so on. Then came philosophical literature-Saiva, Vaishnava, Vedanta and occasionally Jain also. By now many religious centres came to be established and these encouraged the writing of further canonical and expository writing in verse and prose.

The Vaishnava theologians wrote a prose style employing a majority of Sanskrit words and forms, written in the *grantha* script of the Sanskrit language. The language was however not corrupted by such writing which after a few centuries almost ceased to exist as a linguistic force.

Such was the general trend of literary output at a time when the Muslims invaded the land. Religious writing was intensified and we find crops of puranas (compilation of local legends into epic poetry) in scores and several new types of minor poems in hundreds being written. The advent of the British rule introduced printing, and prose writing developed. Everything was going on in a humdrum way till there came political awakening in the land. The struggle for independence started and ushered in an era of nationalistic poetry, with the result that Tamil has come into its own in the affairs of men.

Journalism was responsible for ushering in new writing in the language in the form of essays, short stories, novles, plays, travelogues, science writing and children's literature. Modern writing is still experimenting and growing and trying to scale new peaks.



## THE TAMIL SANGHAM

Sangham is a Sanskrit word meaning a gathering; here it is used in the sense of the gathering of Tamil men of letters – a learned assembly, an academy, or even what we now understand by the term university. We have any number of legends referring to three such academies, the first at a south Madurai and the second at Kapatapuram, both of them deluged by the sea in probably pre-historic times, and the third at the site of the present city of Madurai, the north Madurai. The commentator on the *Iraiyanar Kalaviyal* is the first writer to give an elaborate account of the three academies; Adiyarkku nallar repeats the same particulars in his commentary on *Silappadhikaram*. But the very word *Sangham* is not found in *Tolkappiyam*, since it rules that the letter *ca* cannot occur at the beginning of a word.

Kapatapuram, the head quarters of the second Sangham is mentioned by Valmiki as the capital city of contemporary Pandiyas. Muranjiyur Mudinagaraya, author of the second verse in the *Purananuru*, is mentioned as a poet of the second Sangham. But the poems of the Sangham age which we have today do not mention the sangham at all. The earliest reference to the sangham occurs in a song of Saint Appar, where he says that the Lord of Madurai appeared before the sangham in the guise of a poet and caused a purse of gold to be handed over to Dharmi; this refers to a legend connected with the second verse of the anthology *Kuruntokai*, which says that no flower's fragrance can equal that of a young maiden's tresses. The Chinnamanur plates of Rajasimha Pandiya mention the fact of the establishment of (i.e. the patronage extended to) the Madurapuri Tamil Sangham. Hence the existence of the Sangham was beyond doubt a historical fact.

Lord Siva, the presiding deity of Madurai, in the person of a poet by name Iraiyanar is said to have presided over the first Sangham. Agastya had been said to be a poet and master who presided over the second academy. He wrote a grammar on the three branches of Tamil, which was the guide for the first Sangham; of his twelve disciples, Tolkappiyar wrote a grammar in his name which was the guide for the second Sangham; of the two. *Agattiyam* had ceased to exist even two thousand years ago, while *Tolkappiyam* is today available in full. *Iraiyanar Kalaviyal* mentions in great detail the number of poets in the three Sanghams, the books produced by them, the number of Pandiya patrons, the number of years each academy existed, and so on.

Adiyarkku nallar says that the epic Udayanan kathai, (*Perum-*

*kathai*) is a fine product, carefully worked and finished by a deep study of the works of the second sangham; a critical study of this book bears out his statement and tells us that this book is beyond doubt the result of a careful study of the earlier texts and of the people also. Hence, ignoring legendary exaggeration of ages and times there is nothing improbable in accepting the statement that two academies had prospered for a large number of years under the patronage of the Pandiyas, long before the period of the Sangham poetry which is now available to us. Perhaps the three academies might have been continuous, the distinction as three being necessitated perhaps by natural catastrophes, such as deluge.

The statements that Siva and Kumara participated in the deliberations of the first two sanghams and that these lasted for 4440 and 3700 years may be legend; but existence of poets assuming these names is not legend. The Kalabhra interregnum in Madurai between 250 and 575 A.D. had so completely obliterated all evidences of earlier academies and such highly developed cultural and literary Tamil institutions and traditions, that any statement made in later centuries is taken as mere legend. Of course false legends had also gathered round true facts, such as the existence of a floating sangham seat on the Golden Lotus Tank which would accept only the highest in poetry and push out the rest, and which pushed out all the other poets to give room to the *Kural*, much to the chagrin of the ancient Sangham poets themselves.

Writers had greatly emphasized an insignificant incident that one Vajranandi established a Jain Sangham at Madurai by the end of the 5th century A.D. and had sought to discredit the earlier Tamil Sangham itself. We have absolutely no reference to this Jain Sangham anywhere in Tamil Literature. It is quite possible that it was founded under the Kalabhras to offset the wholly indigenous and ancient influence of the Tamil Sanghams, but it has not achieved anything except to serve as a convenient handle to some scholars to confuse the issue. We have to take the details, factual and legendary statements, of *Kalaviyal* commentator and Adiyarkkunallar as statements calculated not only to give a factual history but also to offset the interloping idea of a Dramila Sangham of the Jains at Madurai.



## THE SANGHAM POETRY

The poetry of the Sangham age had come down to us in two sets of nine anthologies, one set called the *Ettuttohahai*, the Eight Anthologies and the other the *Pattuppattu* or Ten Idylls. Almost all the books in these anthologies are occasional verses except two. They have 450 poets and poetesses during the years 300 B.C. to 250 A.D. Many Sera, Chola and Pandiya crowned monarchs figure as poets and the number of women poets is about 30. All castes in society from the brahmin, down to even the gipsy, men and women, figure as poets. Most of the anthologies give the names of the compiler and the patron who ordered the compilation but much credence cannot be given to these details as these seem to have been added at a later date. The compilations fall into the two classifications, *aham* and *puram*, two concepts in early Tamil literature which may broadly be said to correspond to romantic poetry and heroic poetry. There is a specific pattern of arrangement in the compilation as will be explained below.

Romantic poems are five, heroic poems two and one is a musical composition. None of these is a narrative poem. Each verse in the romantic group, be it of five lines or thirty lines, enacts a scene in a drama; to understand the scene and the poem, the reader has to know the speaker, the person spoken to and the context. Naturally this dramatic setting has given rise to many conventions. The *porul adhikaram* part of *Tolkappiyam* deals with the codification of similar themes of an earlier period. The poet does not utter anything himself but places all the saying in the mouth of some character in the love story – a hero or heroine, his comrade or her maid, a foster mother or even a bystander. Thus the element of drama is always present. A passing thought or a fleeting music is vividly expressed in each verse. Very popular similes and some elementary figures are never lacking; these only help the thought embedded in the characters' words and give it greater force and relevance. Their very simplicity is the great hall mark of their high lyrical quality. The poet indents upon all nature to aid the emotional experience he is trying to put into words. Reading the few lines of verses the reader will pause at every line; thoughts flit across his mind, and he conjures up visions of nature, of life, which though simple in themselves, yet are poignant with subtle strains of feeling and experience. All the verses will easily lend themselves to this understanding.

*Kuruntohai* has lines 5 to 9 to each verse and this contains some of the sweetest short-line poems in Sangham poetry. *Narrinai*

is the next collection with 9 to 12 lines in its verses. *Ahananuru* has 13 to 31 lines in its verses. Its length has introduced a greater elaboration. Many of its verses contain several historical allusions. *Kalittohai*, also an anthology on the *aham* theme, contains 150 verses in the *kalippa* metre. If the verses of *Kuruntohai* etc. are brilliant polished gems, those of *Kalittohai* are jewels, contains 150 verses in the *kalippa* metre. If the verses of *Kuruntohai* etc. are brilliant polished gems, those of *Kalittohai* are jewels, where many such gems are set to make a beautiful and dazzling design of colour and brilliance. Each verse is an elaborate drama, an one-act play, in which often more than one character act their parts. *Ainkurunuru* consists of five groups of 100 very short verses each on the five *tinci* by five authors.

The first *puram* anthology *Padirruppattu* is ten-tens, each verse glorifying the valour and benevolence of a Sera Prince. *Purananuru* 400 verses on *puram* themes, is very fine poetry which is the one book serving as a window on the lives of the Tamil people of 2000 years ago at all levels. 'Any place is my place and the whole world is kin; the good and the bad do not accrue from another, death has always been there; living is neither sweet nor bitter; life goes on in the manner ordained: we neither bow to the great nor taunt the lowly – are some of its thoughts.

*Paripadal*, a collection of musical pieces. Its thought content was of a very high quality. "My Lord, I do not pray for wealth or gold, nor for the pleasures of life; I pray Thee, grant me compassion, love and charity."

*Pattup-pattu* are ten long separate poems in the *asiriyam* metre, ranging from 103 to 782 lines. Of the ten, six are on *puram* and four are on *aham*; again of the six, five are of the *prabandha arrup-padai* type. Of the six, one is in praise of Lord Muruha, while four are in praise of kings, and the last in praise of a local chief.

*Tiru Muruharruppadai* by Nakkirar is probably placed first in the *Pattup-pattu* as an invocatory poem for the collection of ten. It is in praise of the traditional six camps of Lord Muruha. One who has enjoyed the grace of the Lord directs another to the Presence. He describes the six places vividly. Description of nature, the manner of worship, the disciplined ways of His devotees, the life of the hill tribes and the conferment of His grace are all dealt with in graphic language. The poem, though terse and difficult of comprehension, is repeated by rote today in thousands of Tamil homes and temples as a devotional song, sometimes by semi-literates also. Muruha here is not any deity, but a manifestation of the Absolute, the Supreme Siva.



## TIRUK-KURAL

The perfection of Tamilian thought and its greatest contribution to world thought on all problems of life is agreed on all hands to be *Tirukkural*. It is universally acclaimed as the greatest Tamil classic. It has two aspects to its greatness the most profound thought on the most baffling problems of existence and the most astounding economy of words and finish of style. As against a section of contemporary thought which considered woman as a snare, a hindrance to spiritual advancement, the woman of Kural is the noblest of beings, an equal partner with man. According to legends, the author was not an ascetic but a householder, who enjoyed the greatest domestic felicity with his wife Vasuki, who was the sweetest flower of womanhood.

He is said to have been a weaver by profession. But he might have been a farmer, a king's counsellor—we do not know. The first book deals with aram or dharma in general, the second with polity and administration, and the last book with the theme of love.

Tamilnad, from the beginning of time, had the two ways of life, the householder's and the ascetic's. Legends say that the author led the most happy house holder's life. But the Kural extolls both equally. It preaches only monogamy, which implies a lofty status for woman. It does ask her to worship her spouse but everywhere her importance (as the orthodox phrase *grahalakshmi* implies) is emphasized. What is important is not the life itself, but the goals of life and the manner in which they are followed.

Gandhi's philosophy of life was contained in the two words — non-violence and truth. The *Kural* enunciates the same two in a single verse, in the same order: 'Non-killing (non-violence) is the supreme virtue: if you want a second one, follow Truth (non-falsehood). To the Kural, as to Gandhi, righteousness is not a mere end; it is the means also; it is life. The author lived during a period of hand to mouth existence, but he unequivocally advocated non-receiving. The present age of reason has well been anticipated by Him. He enjoins man to test everything by his reason — whatever may be the subject, who ever may have said it. Rituals had been there in his day, but he transcends them all and pleads for a purity of the heart. Fate was then a much maligned term; he holds forth the hope that even fate can be beaten hollow by undaunted effort. Surely the insistence on work and a confidence in its success is a gospel for all time. The *Kural* lays great emphasis on education; not content with one chapter it devotes three chapters to this subject, besides one on eloquence.

The thoughts of the *Kural* in the second book all deal with polity and administration. The author does not make mention of any of the ruling dynasties in Tamilnad. But we know that democracy was unknown in those days and the three crowned monarchs ruled the land. Yet his dictum pronounced for the edification of kings holds good with equal force even in the days of a democratic republic. It is not arms that secure victory for the state: it is the just rule. 'Where the ruler demands money from the subjects, it is just highway robbery': how meaningful today, in the second half of the 20th century, even on the soil where the author wrote this dictum! 'There should be the dread of punishment (for wrong doing) but severe punishment should not be inflicted'. 'The King should restrain his anger where he can expend it; certainly there is no point in restraining it where (as in the case of a superior power) it cannot be exercised.' The chapters on time and place for the efforts of the king cannot be bettered. There are also interesting chapters on medicine, state intelligence and what was called fifth column activity.

Then we pass on to the third book on love themes. The 25 chapters in this book have been distributed into the traditional two divisions, clandestine love and married love. Although the author tries to follow the concepts of love in the Sangham poetry, there is considerable departure from that tradition. Some of the verses are supreme love poetry, just penned down in four or five words: often a whole drama is enacted in these words. All the words are utterances of dramatic characters and hence their suggestion and appeal is all the greater. Similar emotional expression we do not find even in the Sangham poetry.

It is remarkable that the author has written here a treatise on life in all its aspects – a charter for mankind which applies with equal force today, nearly twenty centuries after it was written; it bids fair to apply with the same force for many a century, till eternity. Its relevance is not only to Tamilnad, not only to the Hindu fold, but to the whole world, speaking various languages and following different faiths. Though the charter was made by a man, it applies with equal force to woman also. It lays bare the inmost recesses of the heart and that is the secret of its relevance. Born in a society ridden by caste, he speaks of a casteless, classless society. Persons so distantly placed by language, climate and tradition as Gandhi, Tolstoy, Pope and Schweitzer have hailed it as a testament for mankind for all time. How was the author able to pack so much eternal wisdom into the so few words of each verse?



## SILAPPADHIKARAM

*Silappadhikaram*, the story of the Anklet, is the first epic poem in the Tamil language. The occurrence of the story is placed in the three cities, Puhar (Kaverippattinam), Madurai and Vanji, which are the capitals of the Chola, the Pandiya and the Sera. Accordingly it is divided into the three respective cantos. Kannaki, the daughter of a rich merchant in Puhar is married to Kovalan, the son of another rich merchant there; the story of these two is the *Silappadhikaram*.

Kovalan is enchanted by the dance of a young dancing girl, Madhavi, in the king's court, and forsaking Kannaki, he lives with Madhavi and the two are very much attached to each other. A girl is born to them. There is the national festival called *Indra Vila*. The two move to the beach in the course of the festivities and there they sing love songs to the accompaniment of the yaal. From Madhavi's song. Kovalan, suspects quite wrongly of course, that she is in love with another and deserting her, he returns to Kannaki. He had till that day spent all his wealth on Madhavi. Kannaki, as the dutiful Hindu wife that she really was, offers him her anklets, which were the only jewels now left with her. Kovalan, who is now wholly crestfallen, proposes to sell them in Madurai and engage in business so that he may again acquire riches. So taking Kannaki with him, he marches out of the city at night. On the way, they are befriended by Goundhi Adihal, a Jain nun, who acts as a sort of chaperon for Kannaki.

Leaving Kannaki in the cowherd's quarters he goes to the city bazaar to sell one anklet. A goldsmith who had stolen the queen's anklet falsely accused Kovalan as the thief, to cover up his own guilt. The king intending to say, 'bring him to be killed,' actually said, 'kill him and get the anklet here.' The words of the jeweller could not convince the executioners of Kovalan's guilt, yet he is beheaded. The news spreads to the cowherds' quarters. Kannaki rushes to the court. She sees the lifeless body of Kovalan. The body comes to life. Kovalan embraces her and leaving her there, departs to a celestial abode. She meets the king, accuses him of unjustly killing her husband, and shows him her other anklet. The Pandiya is famous as the producer of pearls. His queen's anklet would naturally have encased a pearl in its core; but Kannaki's anklet contained a ruby. Seeing it, The King realises his injustice and instantly gives up his life; his queen follows. Kannaki, not yet appeased, plucks her left breast and throws it at the city. The god of fire appears and at her command

consumes the city. She leaves the city and going to the top of a hill in the Kongu country, ascends to the celestial regions.

The happenings in the Sera land form the third part. The hill tribes witness her ascent to the heavens and report it to the Sera King, Senkuttuvan. Induced by the queen, he takes out an expedition to the Himalayas to bring a stone for carving out the image of Kannaki for worship. Vanquishing two princes in the north who jeered at the Tamils he brings the stone on their head. When the temple is consecrated, a vision of Kannaki appears. She is now fully appeared. Many princes go there to worship her, including Gajabahu from Sri Lanka.

The poem as we have it today consists of three books and thirty chapters. The metre employed is the *asiriyam*, but throughout the book we have many musical pieces written in other metres: they form an important part of the book. The dance of Madhavi which is the origin of the entire story has been elaborated by the author to such an extent that the poem itself has come to be called a dramatic epic. Later musical pieces are introduced in the poem as songs sung by the hunters, the cowherds, and the hill tribes; other songs are the songs of the ball game, the pestle, the swing and so on. Naturally these lead us to conclude that the author took the motif for these from the folk-songs current in his time at various levels.

The poem is a grand poem. The three books, *Kural*, *Silappadhikaram* and *Kamba Ramayanam* are considered to be the choicest products of the Tamil muse and deservedly so. The author bestows generous praise on the Chola and the Pandiya (and on the Sera in the third part) and in this sense it is an epic for the three ruling dynasties of Tamilnad. It is the only book extant dealing with the three branches of Tamil-*iyal*, *isai* and *natakam*. It deals with all the regions dealt with in Tamil grammar and speaks at length of people in all classes of society. No other work brings out the joys and aspirations of the lower classes as vividly as this epic. The fact that its heroine and hero are taken not from royalty, but from the common people, is significant. Another feature is the reverence shown by the author to all systems of religions. He speaks of Siva, of Muruha, of Vishnu, of Sakti and of Arha as though he is an ardent devotee of each particular god. His devotion transcends clannishness. Such catholicity is rare in later literature. The musical songs in the great epic on the river Kaveri, on Muruha, on Sakti, on Vishnu etc. are rare lyrics and forerunners of the later devotional hymns in Saivism and Vaishnavism.



## KAMBA RAMAYANAM

Kambar, the Emperor of Poesy as he is often called, was to say the least, the result of penances, tapas, performed by the Tamil Muse for ages. His Ramayana marks the crowning glory of Tamil literary production. However, the position was not easy for him. First the choice of a subject. He could have easily written a new story, but the adoption of an existing story, here the Ramayana in stead of the Mahabharata, was simple; it revolved round only three characters; the hero Rama, the heroine Sita and the villain (in the twentieth century parlance) Ravana. Given these chief actors, Kambar had a canvas spacious enough to paint his epic. The story of the Ramayana was everybody's property. So when Kambar narrates it, the discerning reader may be expected to observe the manner of his narration and not the story itself.

Again, the language had been perfected and its great potentialities fully explored by the time Kambar came on the scene; the Tamil language had already been handled by scores of masters; the Sangham poets had conferred upon the language a delicate reticence and austerity. Tiruvalluvar, had given it a lucidity, precision and terseness. The Alvar and the Nayanmar had given the language an extraordinary suppleness and a warm and moving song quality. Now Kambar's genius gave to the language fresh powers of articulation and made it serve the pure perfection of poetry.

The Kamba Ramayana has to be viewed and studied in the background of real history. Born and bred and steeped in the Kaveri culture, the poet has not seen a bright and powerful empire around him. The Cholas were still, not dormant, but valiantly struggling for power and supremacy in their own land. Contemporary life was not as ideal or as glamorous as he would have wished it. So he pictures an ideal rule, an ideal life and an ideal people in Kosala nadu; what he has portrayed is not real at all. His ethics, his patriotism and his valour are all on the ideal plane. While speaking of Kambar, we feel it is wrong to think of Brahmanism or Jainism or Buddhism as forces which had moulded his narration and his outlook; we can only think of Kaveri-ism and Kambar-ism. To one who has a panoramic view of life, of human character, its depth and innermost secrets, all these have effortlessly and unconsciously fitted into their places. There is no question of copying or adapting. Kambar had a great legacy in art and letters; all the good things of the past are his own. He reproduces them in his work in a better form and to a better purpose; he does not learn them; they are all his.

Kambar took the story of the Ramayana from Valmiki and has acknowledged it. The entire story, its narration and presentation, all the characters, their behaviour pattern, the situations and the drama, are all his own. The Tamil book is entirely different from the Sanskrit in respect of everything except perhaps the names of the characters and the outlines of the story – different in plot, in construction, in place, in age, in culture, in physical environment and in accepted values and ideals. We shall desist from saying more.

Following in the foot-steps of the Alvar and the Nayanmar, Kambar has absolute command over the art of versification; he always has his fingers on the pulse of the people and his vocabulary, be it Tamil or Sanskrit, echoes the beating of this pulse. Again the dramatic situations. On every page in the narrative we have a short play. Characters appear, say or act; the matter works up to a pitch; and suddenly there is a curtain fall; the curtain-fall is objectively perceivable as on a stage. Kambar is a great master in this kind of stage management. Combined with this management is the dialogue. The very short boat scene in which Guha ferries Bharata and the royal entourage across the Ganges is a classic instance bringing into play all these elements.

Characterisation is the chief forte of Kambar. Every character in the epic has a personality of his or her own and in a couple of words we can identify the person. No one is too small for Kambar in this regard. Mantarai the Kuni, Sumitrai and so many other minor characters come to life at a touch from the poet; it is not as though characterisation has been attempted only with the major characters like Rama, Sita, Hanuman or Kumbhakarna.

What shall we say of the metre – the short ones, the long drawn ones, the changes of metre in harmony with the change of the scene and emotion?

We have not said here a word about descriptions in Kambar – descriptions of human beings, nature, emotions and situations; they are there in any place we choose to lay our fingers. Abstract metaphysics and philosophy also we have in sufficient depth. The invocatory verses in each *kanda*, the words of praise from Virata and the like, and even in descriptions like sun rise, we see Kambar forgetting the immediate present, going to the roots of all being. The philosophy so touched upon, though apparently Vaishnava, is not sectarian but universal. Kambar came of a high caste affluent family, and Sadayan was not a patron in the western sense but a connoisseur an art lover, who encouraged Kambar in his literary efforts.



## AVVAIYAR

The name Avvai is a familiar one in Tamil literature and legends. Avvai is just another form of the word *Ammal*, the mother. An elderly lady, a grandmotherly one, bold and outspoken, having no attachment was called in the past, Avvai. Such women have evolved throughout all the periods of Tamil history. Many stories and legends have grown round them, highlighting their wit and wisdom. The gifted among them had sung some poetical pieces and often given expression to their thoughts in verse. These have perpetuated their memory. A few such Avvaiyar will be noticed here.

The earliest perhaps was the Avvai of the Sangham age who visited the courts of the crowned monarchs and the other chiefs of the period, commanding their reverence. She was very much moved not only by the reverence but affection and consideration shown by Adikaman, a minor chief of the period. Once he received a *nelli* (*phyllanthus*) fruit which had the rare quality of conferring longevity. He did not eat it and profit by it, but waited and when Avvai came to his court, gave it to her, without informing her of its special virtue. His view was that if the poetess ate the fruit and lived long, the world would benefit by her wisdom and her poetry. She ate it and then coming to know of its virtue, was much moved. She has celebrated this in a song.

Another Avvai lived a thousand years after her and there are innumerable anecdotes about her wit and wisdom. She has written four diactic poems couched in a gnomic form.

A fine story about her highlights the concept of the Omnipresence of God. She went to Kailas and bowed before Siva, who asked her to sit down. She did so, and being a very old woman, could not fold her legs but stretched them straight in front of Siva Himself. Parvati (Siva's consort) seeing this, admonished her saying: "Old woman, don't you see you are stretching your legs in front of Siva? Stretch them in some other direction." Avvai very humbly replied: "O Mother, Forgive my stupidity. Please show me some direction where Siva is not." Parvati could not reply anything to this humble but pertinent retort.

Lord Muruha is said to have played a trick on her in order to extract from her some thoughts on what is cruel, what is sweet, what is great and what is rare. She replied him in four verses:

Poverty is cruel; poverty in youth more so; unbearable painful disease still more; an unloving wife is most cruel; and having to take food from her is the worst calamity.

Solitude is sweet, worshipping God sweeter, company of the enlightened still more; sweetest is their friendship, in the waking hours and in the dreams.

Speaking of things that are great, the author begins with saying that the universe is great and ends with saying that as God is in the hearts of his devotees, men of devotion are the greatest.

Rare is to be born as a human being without any physical deformity; securing erudition and wisdom is rarer; charity and penance are the rarest; the heavens open their doors to those that perform charities and penances.

Asked about the goals of life (*purusharthas*) Avvai replied: Giving is virtue; wealth is that acquired through right endeavour; pleasure is that realised by a loving husband and wife; and *moksha* (release) is the devotion to Siva, discarding these three.

Avvai is the very personification of fearlessness, simplicity and gratefulness. Once she trekked a long way and footsore and hungry, she reached a lonely hut. It was raining heavily and she was drenched from head to foot. In the hut lived two small girl sisters, who had seen better times, but the changing tides of fortune had reduced them to a life of abject poverty and misery. The two of them had only one decent dress between them. One of them used to wear it and work outside while the other worked inside the hut clad in rags. When they saw the old woman coming to their hut drenched in rain, they gave her their decent dry dress to put on, warmed her wet sari near the fire inside the hut and to appease her hunger they gathered some wild greens from round their hut, cooked some ragi with the greens and gave her this gruel. Avvai ate with relish. She was more moved by their kindness even in their own helpless plight. Her gratitude was expressed in a song: "These little girls, decked in golden bracelets treated me-falsely saying that it was only a gruel of greens – to a feast of nectar, warm and neat, with plenty of ghee, in a fresh green colour, to my heart's content." Avvai's words always had a super human effect when she said 'girls decked in golden bracelets' the words had immediate effect. The poor hut grew into a fine mansion with all attendant riches and the paraphernalia of affluence, and servants. Numberless stories abound in Tamil literature extolling Avvai. She always held that there were only two castes – the Noble caste, the givers and the Ignoble caste, the non-givers.

Another story of how she worshipped Ganapati and was lifted up to the Presence of Siva by His trunk, in time to meet her friends there is well known.



## SUBRAHMANYA BHARATI

The one poet who forged a link between the past and the present and between the present and the future, who excelled in prose as well as in poetry, and who exploited journalism to a higher literary purpose with considerable success, was Subrahmanya Bharati. The rise of this genius synchronised with the freedom fight, and in him we have perhaps the greatest national poet for all time. The passing of years will only heighten the value of his poetry; even after nationalism dies, a major portion of his poetry will live as a cherished literary legacy of the Tamils. He was a prolific writer; poetry, prose, short story, political criticism, social reform, devotional writing, and philosophical exposition flowed from his pen freely. In the struggle against poverty and against the oppression of the foreign yoke, he could not last long; he died young, at the close of the first world war, long before freedom was won. Much of his writing was prophetic and far ahead of his times. Writers like him are not produced every other day.

Subrahmanya Bharati (1889-1921) is the one poet who has nationwide recognition. He had forged a sense of national unity during the early period of the Indian struggle for independence. He cries aloud in his songs his love of Tamil, love of India and love and devotion to the chosen deity Krishna, Muruha or Sakti, and these elements have endeared him not only to the educated but to the unlettered as well. Some of his songs are household words.

The volume of his writing in all fields is vast. His national songs, philosophical and devotional songs, *Kuyil pattu* (a fantasy) and *Kannan pattu* are all equally popular. His *Panchali Sapatam* (Vow of Draupati) is a scene from the Mahabharata elaborated into more than 300 verses of modern poetry. It is superbly lyrical and exquisitely dramatic, and portrays the spirit of nascent India's struggle for freedom from the British yoke.

His essays are valuable contributions in the realm of prose but he will always be cherished as the great harbinger of a new epoch in poetry. He drew inspiration from all the classical masters but yet had chalked out a new path of his own, where his very breath carried fire with it. Born a brahmin, he decried brahminism and preached a casteless society. He was the greatest inspiration for the freedom movement which gathered momentum a decade after his passing away. Coming in the line of the Alvar and the Nayanmar, of Kural and Kambar, of Arunagiri and the Siddhar, he brought a poetry of power to the level of the common man without in the least sacrificing classicism.

## SECTION 10

# PHILOSOPHY



## SAIVA PHILOSOPHY

The philosophy of Saivism in Tamilnad has been known by the name of Saiva Siddhanta. The term means that Saivism is the proven conclusion of all systems of thought. Systems of Philosophy had been evolved emphasizing various aspects and conclusions, from the days of Sankara (9th century). All the systems of philosophy codified after Sankara are theistic systems. The Saiva system of thought had its roots in the pre-historic past. Archaeologists like Marshall had asserted that Siva worship was found in the Mohenjadaro and Harappa excavations and that Saivism could be considered as the most ancient of all living religions.

That the mantra, *OM Nama-sivaya*, is found in the very centre of all the Vedas has been pointed out earlier. The famous Rig Veda quotation, *Ekam sat viprah bahuda vadanti* signifies that there is one Supreme Being, which the learned speak of in many ways. In the context, that Sat has been interpreted by learned scholars as the Unnamed One, Siva. The Vedas worship many gods as Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Vayu, Agni, Hiranyagarbha, Soma, Surya, Chandra, Vishnu and Rudra. These represent the various powers of a Supreme Being, the One who is the *Sat*, the *Ekam* of the quotation. This concept of the One and the Supreme is also implied in the Tamil poetic conventions beginning from *Tolkappiyam*. Describing the four regions in poetic convention, this treatise mentions Muruha, Vishnu, Varuna and Indra as the presiding deities of the four regions and has by implication and inference left the suggestion of a Supreme Power which is One and Immutable and naturally is the Director of all the others. That Supreme is Siva, who is not mentioned by name but whose attributes are all described in sufficient detail in the earliest available Tamil literature.

The term Saiva Siddhanta is first mentioned by Tirumular in his *Tirumantiram*: "The Saiva Siddhantins have studied the scriptures, walked the path of yoga and jnana, shed their *anava* and finally realised the Self in themselves." Tirumular lived in the 5th century. Although the Samaya Acharyas do not mention the term, we learn from inscriptions that the Pallava King, Rajasimha (688-705) who ruled from Kanchi and built the famous Kailasanatha temple there, called himself a follower of Saiva Siddhanta, *Agama-priya* and *Siva Chudamani*. These make it clear that historically Saiva Siddhanta, was a well established term in those days, as the distinct name of the philosophy of the Tamil people.

It is not to be construed that the Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy came to exist only from Saint Meykandar. The Philosophy had been elaborately dealt with by the Saiva Acharyas Sambhandhar, Appar, Sundarar and Manicka Vachakar and by others like Karaikkal Ammai and Tirumular earlier. But they had clothed the philosophy in their devotional language. The Philosophy embedded in the Agamas was one which filled the lives of the Tamil people.

It was given to the young Saint Meykandar with the help of the divine guidance and instruction received by him from Siva, through his guru, Paramjoti munivar, to collect all the thoughts current before him in the *Tirumantiram*, in the other canonical Books, and in the Agamas, codify them under various heads and enunciate them as the famous twelve aphorisms, his *Sivajnana bodham* by the middle of the 12th century. Saint Umapati, fourth in the line of acharyas from Meykandar, says that Saiva Siddhanta is the essence of the Vedanta (the Upanishads). St. Kumaraguru-parar of the 17th century says: "Saiva Siddhanta is the nectar extracted from the rare and delicious fruit borne on the topmost branch of the Vedanta tree."

All philosophies deal with the three entities—I (the soul), Mine (matter and the bonds), and God. Terminologies may differ but the substance is the same. *Atma, jivatma, chetana, anu, jiva, pasu* are all different terms used to denote the soul indicated by I. The second is matter which is the subject of perception and experience by the senses of man and it is called the external nature, material object and its derivatives, and the relationship, which is subtle and called variously as *maya, pasa* etc. The difference in the concepts will be evident even in the terms employed. The third is called differently as the Supreme, the Absolute, God, Brahman, *Pati*, the Self, *Vibhu* etc. Differences in the philosophical systems arise only in defining these, their mutual relationship, the pathway to reach God and the manner of the ultimate union.



## PATI (GOD)

The Absolute in Saivism is given the name Siva (that which confers good). Briefly said, God is one, the all-Pervasive, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, self-luminous One. The other two categories are under His control, through His all-pervasive power, termed Chit Sakti. These attributes of God may be elaborated for purposes of better understanding on the following lines. God is Pati, beyond the fettered souls and the fetters. He is also called Pasupati, He who protects the souls (*Pasu*). He has neither form nor is He formless. He is *nirguna*, without attributes. Yet eight attributes are attached to Him, so that the mind of man may be able to contemplate on Him. He is the cause of the origin and the end of everything but He has no beginning and no end. He is all-pervasive, always immanent in all things, at all times. He has no body. The Chit Sakti or His own Consciousness – Force, His Grace, is His Body. He causes the bonds to fetter souls according to their karma but He is not bound by them. He causes the functions such as creation, preservation and dissolution to be performed by Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra by his direction but He does not do anything. He is the soul's soul, causing consciousness or knowledge in the individual soul. He is the infinite and the infinitesimal. He cannot be comprehended by the senses or the mind, yet He is the refuge for all things created. He is One without a second.

His true form is *Sat-Chit-Ananda*; existence (Truth), knowledge and bliss, in other words, Life, Light and Love. He can be perceived only through His own Grace; otherwise, He cannot be pointed out as "this is God".

Saivism does not accept the doctrine of *avatara* or incarnation. What brings about *avatara*, incarnation or birth is *karma*. For Siva there is no karma. Nowhere, in no legend or purana, has it ever been said that Siva was born. He is always the Transcendental Being and as such He has never limited that nature by being born in flesh and blood. He takes forms to help mortals, out of His own Grace, but never restricts Himself to the body which is a mere outcome of the *panchabhutas* (the five elements). The scriptures speak of Him as Visvadhika, Visvakarana, Visvarupi and Visvantaryami (One who transcends the Universe, who is the cause of it, who has it as His form and who is its prime Director). Siva has no name, no form and no attribute, but He assumes all these out of His infinite mercy to help the mortals.

## SOUL (PASU)

The soul is called *pasu*, because it is bound by fetters (*pasa*). The souls are infinite in number, have no beginning and are eternal; they are not the creation of God. He creates only their bodies, organs and spheres of activity and experience and the objects therefor. Souls are born in any manner of births from the vegetable kingdom onwards. From the very beginning they are bound by the three classes of bonds. The nature of the soul is to identify itself with the environment. When associated with matter, it loses, as it were, its inherent consciousness and behaves like inert matter. When associated with the Spirit, it regains its consciousness and exercises it. The soul's consciousness is limited by an inherent pre-cosmic bond called *anava*. The Chit Sakti helps the soul to assume a body and enter the orbit of births and deaths in nature, subject to its inexorable laws. Association with the body results in action. Action brings always its own fruits, good and bad, and to enjoy the fruits, further birth becomes necessary, resulting in further action, and so the cycle of births, action and death goes on endlessly. Siva in His infinite mercy, appears before the soul at the proper time in the form of a guru, helps the soul to sever the bonds and break the cycle and directs the soul along the path of final deliverance from bonds and of union with God.

The analogy of the prince in the hunters' company is a familiar one, mentioned by many systems. A Prince by birth is lost among the hunters, does not realise his great ancestry but acts and behaves like a hunter. The King sees him, takes him away from the hunter tribe, makes him know his great heritage and makes him a true prince. In like manner, the Lord appears in his own good time as the guru before the soul which is caught up in the fetters of the senses, removes the fetters and places it under His feet in the enjoyment of Supreme Bliss.

Academically the souls are classified in three categories according to the *malas* (impurities) or bonds which are attached to them. All human beings, however evolved they be, are called *sakalas*; they are affected by the three bonds *anava*, *karma* and *maya*. The next higher category is called *pralayakalas*, who are not contaminated by *maya* but are affected by both *anava* and *karma*. The other category is *vijnanakalas* who have got over the *maya* and *karma malas*, but are yet affected by the *anava mala*. However it has to be clearly understood that the *pralayakalas* and *vijnanakalas* belong to the celestial regions and have nothing to do with mortals; their mention for all purposes has only academic interest.



## THE BONDS (PASA)

The bonds which fetter the soul are classified in Saivism as three: they are *anava*, *karma* and *maya*. They are collectively known as *mala* (impurity) and *pasa* (bonds).

*Anava* is said to be an inherent pre-cosmic evil; it is not the nature of the soul but only an accretion or impurity. It is referred to by several terms such as ignorance, darkness, the ego etc. It obscures the consciousness of the soul. Material darkness conceals all other matter but makes itself known. But this *anava*-darkness obscures everything and obscures itself also, with the result that the soul does not realise that it is enveloped in this darkness. It is also called simply *mala* and *mulamala*.

*Karma*, both good and bad, is the cause of all births and deaths. According to its nature, births vary and the consciousness of the soul also varies. Karma attaches itself to the soul even in the disembodied state in a subtle form. God's grace links the karma to the soul which goes on experiencing the fruits of past karmas. In the process, its actions give rise to further good and bad deeds, and further karma goes on mounting, through the functioning of thought, word and deed. Thus karma itself is resolved into three categories – the *prarabdha*, the part out of the large mass of accumulated karma that is being currently experienced; *sanchita*, the balance of that mass which is to be experienced in further births; and *agamyā* karma accumulating afresh through our current actions. This is usually explained on the analogy of rice that is being cultivated for food. The paddy harvested formerly and stored in the granary is *sanchita*; that which we have taken out, dehusked into rice, cooked and have served on the table for eating now is *prarabdha*; and lastly, the paddy that is now maturing in the field for a future harvest is *agamyā*. Just as these categories are different, so also the process of their removal also is different. Non-attachment to the fruits of action stops *agamyā* from accumulating. *Prarabdha* is experienced and ceases with this birth; and *sanchita* is burnt away by the *diksha* of the Guru.

*Maya* is the third of the bonds. The concept of this *maya* is totally different from *maya* of Vedānta. There *maya* is non-existent, mere illusion and on its removal, the soul sees itself as the Brahman. But in Siddhānta, it is ever existing; it is the material cause, the cause from which all things are evolved and into which all things are dissolved. It is the first cause for creation. From the subtle principle of *maya*, all matter is created; God's *sakti* is the instrumental cause and God is the efficient cause. The objects and tools

of experience are created and provided for the souls from maya. The soul is bound by *anava* in the primordial stage; its consciousness does not function. Maya constitutes the body and the tools for the soul helping its consciousness to function. Maya in Siddhanta helps the soul to experience its karma by providing it with the body and other tools and areas or objects for experience and the very experience itself. It remains as the subtle principle, producing gross material for the experience of the soul. The maya of Vedanta on the other hand is mere illusion, which opens the consciousness of the soul and on the removal of the illusion, the soul sees itself as the Brahman; there the soul and the Brahman are one; maya simply obscures this knowledge. In Saivism is something which is material.

*Maya* in Siddhanta is referred to in three stages and their definition will help to comprehend the 36 principles or *tattvas* of the system. The lower level of maya is the *mula prakriti* or the *prakriti* maya, which is the last of the seven realms of the *vidya tattvas*. It gives rise to the twentyfour *atma tattvas* – the five elements, the five perceptions – smell, taste, light, touch and sound, the five *karmendriyas* (tools of action), the five *ijnanendriyas* (tools of perception) and the four *antah-kaanas*, inner organs. This maya is responsible for the afflictions of the soul. The three *gunas* are contained in this maya in an unmanifested condition.

Souls in Saiva Siddhanta are classified into three categories, according to the stage of their spiritual evolution. The lowest order is *sakala* – those which are bound by the three bonds *anava*, *karma* and *maya*. These exist in the *prakriti* maya. We ordinary human beings are all *sakalas*.

The next is *asuddha maya* which gives rise to the seven *vidya tattvas-kaala* (time), *niyati* (order and sequence of karma), *kalai* (action), *vidya* (intelligence), *raga* (desire) the *purusha* (perception of the senses) and *maya* (doubt and illusion.) Souls in this area are considered to have the two bonds only, *anava* and *karma* and are called *pralayakalas*.

*Suddha maya* is the region of Siva's five-fold functions and also of the five *Suddha tattvas*. This is the region of the souls with the one bond, *anava*; these souls are called *vijnanakalas*.

All human beings are in the grip of the three bonds and are *sakalas*.



## DELIVERANCE (MUKTI)

A few words on the mukti state may be necessary. According to the *sat karya vada* of Saiva Siddhanta, the three entities are eternal; *Pati*, *pasu* and *pasam* exist in the pre-cosmic stage and so they do exist even after final liberation. This latter position does not appear to be easily understandable. On liberation the soul does not merge with Siva and become absolutely one, though we speak of oneness; but it is said to be in a non-dual union, a strict advaita concept. It is true that it has been liberated from bonds, from births and deaths. The state of union is said to be *advaita*, non-dual; not *ekam* or one, but just not-two. The Siddhantin always calls this a non-dual union; not two, of course, but also not one. If it is one then the souls cannot be distinct and eternal and the state of bliss does not arise. The released soul is experiencing infinite bliss without in any way taking part in the five-fold functions of Siva. The experience of bliss is eternal; no more births and no more deaths. Siva is the giver and the soul the receiver of bliss.

In such a state, the *anava mala* no longer binds the released soul. Like a fried seed which has lost its power of germination, *anava* exists but no longer obscures the consciousness of the released soul in the *mukti* state; it continues of course to cause obscuration to the bound souls. At the time of total dissolution it is involuted in *maya*, but on creation again, it attaches itself to the unliberated souls and continues its usual function. Hence, *anava mala* is said to exist even in the mukti state and so it is also said to be one eternal entity.

The means for liberation have also to be understood. The analogy of the prince in the hunters' camp is used to illustrate the procedure of release. The king's son by some cause had got separated from his natural habitat and got entangled amongst hunters who brought him up as a hunter. He considers himself to be just a hunter. Years pass by. One day the king sees him, recognizes him as his own son, separates him from the hunter's group, takes him to the palace and makes him a prince. In like manner, the *atma* (soul) does not know its real nature nor does it know its master; it is in the meshes of the five senses which are like the hunters. The master appears before him in due time in the form of a *guru*, makes him perceive that he is not the senses and so on, teaches him their true nature, removes his ignorance, gives him supreme consciousness and lifts him up to His holy feet. Siva who goes to him as a *guru* purifies him by His *diksha*. Of the

three classes of *karma*, *sanchita* is burnt away by His *diksha*; *prarabdha* is experienced so long as the soul is in the embodied state, and ceases with the body; when he goes about his life in the firm conviction that all his action is Siva's no *agamyakarma* accrues. Thus all *karma* is reduced to nought. The instruction by the guru helps to remove *anava mala*. Grace settles on the soul, which attains final bliss.

While proceeding on the spiritual path, the company of similar seekers and men of God is essential. Whatever charity is done is best done to Siva *jnanis* and their worship will take the individual to the feet of God. He should unceasingly utter the name of Siva. Siva's emblems – the sacred ash and the *rudraksha* beads are to be worn always. He should also worship the Siva temples. When he worships his guru as Siva Himself, He does appear through this guru and help him to attain release.

The liberated state is defined differently in the different religions. Sankara-advaita would say that it is just the full realization that 'I am Brahman, this realised state of *Ekam* or one is *mukti*.' Vaishnavism would call it the state of being in the Lord's place eternally in His own form and enjoying His own eternal bliss.

Heaven and hell respectively figure prominently in the people's mind as the place of enjoyment which the virtuous attain and the place of punishment to which the evil persons go after their life span on earth is over. But they have no place in the realm of philosophy. There is no such place of pleasure as heaven and no such place of perdition as hell. Heaven and hell exist on the very earth itself and each man makes his own heaven or hell. Both are mere states of the mind, based on a natural adherence and practice of the virtuous life and the long cherished values thereof. According to the *Bhagavat Gita*, complete non-attachment to action and its fruits with a conscious practice of one's own *dharma* in the right path is its own reward and this leads one to the state of *moksha* or liberation. The *Jivan mukta* is one who is the realized soul but continues to exist on earth discharging his functions therein without the least attachment so that all residuary *karma* may be nullified through experience. The *mukti* state is one of the chief factors which distinguishes the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy from all the others such as the Visishtadvaita of Ramanuja and the Ekātma vada of Sankara.



## THE DANCE OF NATARAJA

The Cosmic Dance of Siva as Nataraja has the supreme purpose of redeeming the souls from their state of bondage and of giving them deliverance and bestowing on them eternal bliss or non-dual union with Himself. This purpose is achieved by His Dance in the Nataraja form which is just a symbolic conception of His five-fold functions.

The soul and the subtle cause of matter are, like the Absolute, eternal and all-pervasive. This is a basic concept of Siddhanta; it is called the *satkarya vada*; i.e., what exists cannot perish and what is not cannot be created. Just as the potter makes pots from the earth with the help of his wheel, so also God, the efficient cause, creates the universe from *maya* the material cause, with the help of His Chit Sakti, the instrumental cause. This is creation and it is going on for ever. All objects are born, they live or stay for some period, and then cease to exist. The universe affords them a place for existence. In the pre-cosmic stage, the souls were all bound up with their karma, with their consciousness obscured by anava. Siva created the universe and the objects therein for the enjoyment of the souls and gave them their births and the senses for perception, in order that their karma might be reduced to nought through experiencing, that their anava might be removed, and that they might attain bliss. This is creation, and the riddance of the three bonds is the aim of creation.

The second function is *sthiti* or preservation. The significance is to preserve the bodies and other objects of experience till the time allotted, in order to aid the soul to enjoy the fruits of its karma. The soul in the embodied state in the course of its enjoyment of life naturally does further karma which goes on giving further and further births. While swinging in this cycle of births and deaths, the consciousness of the soul is awakened to the extent of its karma, impelling it forward on the spiritual path. The providing of the body and objects is preservation.

The next is dissolution (*samhara*) not destruction. The spirit and matter co-exist with God. Dissolution is the giving of an enforced rest. This means that the souls which get wearied through endless births and deaths, but yet do not have their own consciousness fully woken up to the necessity of seeking deliverance are given a period of rest and kept in the subtle state for some time; then again the objects of their experience are re-created out of *maya* and they are allowed further births for again going through the balance of karma and for seeking deliverance.

Obscuration, *tirobhava*, helps the soul to experience the fruits of its karma and thus in course of time to prepare the ground for completely reducing the balance of karma to nought; this is essential for the maturity of the *anava mala* and its ripeness for removal.

The last function is bestowal of Grace, *anugraha*. When karma is reduced to nought and anava is removed, Grace settles on the soul. Deliverance or oneness with Siva results.

This five-fold function goes on in the presence of Siva, in various grades of competence in the souls. The Dance of Siva as Nataraja symbolises this function.

The whole universe is in motion. After the disintegration of the atom was accomplished, scientists have come to learn that there is one Supreme source of energy, which activates everything in the universe. On the bombardment of the atom, it was discovered that there was a nucleus of matter within the atom which was always revolving with a high velocity. It is this motion which is responsible for all activity. In the sphere of space, we have seen how space-travel has been made possible by releasing the energy compressed within the atom. The eternal movement of heavenly bodies, not only of the solar system but of the many more stellar systems of which this is only one, is possible only because of this energy. Our ancient fore-fathers have given this supreme power the name of God and have called Him Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer whose dance makes the heavenly bodies go round in a mad rush but extra-ordinarily organised and controlled by a super-human Law. The form of Nataraja thus conceived is both artistic and functional.

The *Panchakshara* (the five syllables *na ma si va ya*) are the mystic mantra of Siva. The Nataraja form embodies all the different concepts associated with this mantra. The drum is symbolic of creation. The arm held in even pose symbolises preservation. The fire in the left hand is dissolution. The right foot planted on *Muyalaka* (who himself symbolises ignorance) symbolises obscuration. Lastly the lifted left foot under which all released souls find rest is considered symbolical of Grace or *anugraha*.



## GRACE (SAKTI)

The concept of Sakti and Grace is unique in Saiva Siddhanta. The Consciousness-Force of Siva is separately termed His Sakti. Siva and Sakti are not separate. The worldly concept of considering the two as the father and the mother of the world is just a puranic terminology employed for mass understanding. Sakti's form is just pure consciousness, bestowing Grace on the souls; this is *Parasakti*. In the process of the five-fold functions, it is called *Tirodhana Sakti*, when it seeks to remove the bonds from the souls. The will of Siva to redeem them and direct them to final release is *Icha Sakti*. The will of Siva calculated to reduce the bonds to nought is *Jnana Sakti*. The same Force when it creates the worldly and other objects of experience for the souls is called *Kriya Sakti*.

Grace is the Supreme Mercy of Siva to redeem the souls. This causes dissolution and then creation. The fish living in the ocean of milk does not drink the milk for its food but feeds on the smaller fish and the insects therein. In the same way, the souls do not realise the all-pervasive Siva, but run after the transient worldly pleasures. The provision of bodies and the objects for sense perception is to redeem the souls from such hankering. Worldly pleasures can only serve as the dung and soda-ash which the washerman uses to wash dirty linen. Pleasures and pain are God's dispensations calculated to nullify karma. Painful experiences are the surgical operations of the capable surgeon, intended ultimately to cure the patient of his ailment. In another sense we may say that this is like the caning by a parent when the child misbehaves; even caning is born out of the love of the parent. So also the hard travails and sufferings in life are God's way of helping the soul to overcome its accumulated karma.

But yet, the ways of God's mercy are imponderable and immeasurable. We may not be able to understand His ways. All that we can do is to surrender ourselves to Him absolutely, attune ourselves and our ways of living to His ways, and await His Grace. Striving and Grace cannot be equated. Anugraha or grace is not in direct proportion to man's striving on earth in this one birth. But striving has to go on. God in His infinite Mercy bestows His Grace when it pleases Him; but we should be prepared and fit, when it arrives.

## THE GURU AND HIS INITIATION

An initiation is prescribed for the Saiva to qualify him to proceed on the path of a *sadhana* for release. This is called *diksha*. This is in essence the Gracious Look of the realised *guru*, who is considered to be no less than Siva Himself. *Diksha* means preparing the ground for the conferment of Grace, by the removal of ignorance. There are several categories of *diksha* and different grades also. The first *samaya diksha* befits him to perform the daily austerities including *japa* and the second *visesha diksha* to perform his personal worship of a *murti*; and the third *nirvana diksha* helps him onward in his efforts to overcome the cycle of births and attain union with God. The daily rituals, *Siva puja* and the *japa* instructed by the guru are to be performed for life.

The spiritual guru occupies the highest place in the spiritual progress of the *sadhaka* (aspirant). The scriptures enjoin a three-fold worship; *guru*, *linga* and *jangama*—the preceptor, the *murti* which is God and the godly men (*Bhagavan*, *acharya* and *bhagavata* in Vaishnavism). Worship of the guru is prescribed in all branches of Hinduism. Although realised souls are becoming rarer, the guru is to be worshipped as Siva Himself, whatever may be the stage of his evolution. The human form of the guru is immaterial. The *sadhaka* has to conceive of the Supreme Guru as abiding in the human form and guiding him. This conception is necessary for the progress and for the emancipation of the *sadhaka*. *Bhavana*, *mantra* and *kriya* are the three interwoven factors in worship; just as a piece of stone functions for God as the *linga*, so also the human person functions for the *Parama* (Supreme) *Guru*. *Bhavana* is the source of all pleasure even in the ordinary planes of human living. A man considers a photograph of his lady love as she herself; he never thinks of it as a mere piece of bromide paper. This *bhavana* is indispensable for one's own upliftment. No *sadhaka* would call the Sivalinga, 'Oh this is a mere piece of stone!' So also, no disciple shall call his guru, 'Oh! this is after all Mr. So-and-So!' It is only the mind that conceives of the higher things and uses them as steps for further progress. The *vijnana kalas* are instructed by the indwelling God. The *pralaya kalas* are instructed by Siva as Umamahesvara from the heavens. It is to the *sakalas* that He appears in the human form as a guru.



## IMAGE WORSHIP

Image worship or idolatry is a much abused term. Eminent seers hold that religion cannot run away from symbolism, from icons and crucifixes, from rites and dogmas. Faith must have something to grasp, and image worship furnishes that something. Enlightened people also perform image worship but they never confuse the image which is the outer symbol with the inner reality. So long as we do not mistake the symbol for the Reality we are not idolators. But when the idol becomes more important than the faith itself, it is idolatry. The images serve to bring to us the Infinite; a 'symbol does not subject the Infinite, to the finite; but it renders the finite transparent.'

A sloka uttered at the end of the *atmartha* Siva puja will make the concept clear: "O Lord, I have committed the crime of restricting Your Omnipresence, into this image of mine for the duration of my puja. Forgive me this fault and now assume Your Omnipresent form."

Idol worship need not estrange religions and mar religious fellowship. Spiritual experience or realization is beyond theology and dogma. Religion today cares more for the spread of its dogma than for the advancement of mankind in spiritual realization. One that understands the idol worship will not have any confusion; to him the image is just a reminder of the Supreme.

It is true that idols find a place in Saiva worship. But the Saivas never worship the idol: their worship reaches beyond and goes farther to the Supreme Idea that is sought to be invoked in the idol. The mind of man which functions only through the senses and the other internal organs cannot at all reach the Suddha Siva, the Nirguna (without attributes), the Absolute. Hence, not merely to satisfy these organs, but to give them some concrete object on which they can focus the senses and the organs to begin with, the Form of Siva, the Saguna (with attributes) had been invented by our forefathers. This is installed in different forms in the temple so that the limited mind of man may comprehend the Unlimited Being in the symbol. Conceptually, the image or the Sivalinga is only a symbol; the very word *linga* means symbol. It is not God or Siva. It is a symbol intended to point to the Being beyond. All thought goes to that Being through the symbol. When man worships the symbol as the abode of the Universal Being, he is able to think and contemplate on Him to the extent his training and evolution in spiritual matters have made him competent therefor. Only the wholly ignorant think that the image is God.

But devotionally the image is Siva. It is the manifest form of Siva. Nobody thinks of the image as a piece of stone or of metal. It is indeed the absolute Siva, the Formless, dwelling here in this Form to receive the supplication of the ardent devotee and shower His grace on him. When the concentrated thought effect of a large mass of humanity endows it with a great potency for grace and succour, it gets haloed as the abode of Divinity and as generations roll by this potency for aid and succour is indeed felt by succeeding generations of worshippers who come to have greater faith in the grace of God.

The images, to give a crude illustration, serve like the algebraic symbols of letters and the like; the letters by themselves have no meaning: but yet they help man to solve many problems in higher mathematics: they have helped man to land on the moon! This is on the material plane. The images serve a similar purpose on the spiritual plane.

Worship of images has a place both in the worship in the home and the congregational worship in the temples. Worship is always preceded by faith. We all function in the world of perception, where the senses project outward and gain experiences for us on worldly affairs. But they have no entry into the realm of the spirit. "He is in the Beyond where the word and the mind do not reach" say the Upanishads and the Tamil sastras. This is a dimension beyond the senses where only instrument of faith can approach and the experiences can be measured only by the yardstick of spiritual faith.

The Infinite, the Self, is brought into the image through faith, the transcendental is thus also immanent. The hymnists sing of the happy experience of the immanent and the transcendental in the same breath, because the immanence is a Reality for them. But it is equally possible for the lay men, who do not have that spiritual experience, through the faith in the image worship. This is thus a means and a necessity for them to enter, ever so partially or marginally, into that spiritual experience. In other words, image worship serves the useful purpose of stimulating devotion in the sympathetic heart. The image is actually God on earth for ordinary man kind. Image worship has through the centuries prompted religious art and caused the creation of mythological and devotional literature. It has been responsible for the continuity of our culture, which had been completely religion-oriented.



## THE PATH

Sadhana is the path. The paths to realization in Hinduism are many. In Saivism they take certain well laid-out directions.

To help him progress godward, some paths have been indicated. They are called the four paths: *charya*, *kriya*, *yoga* and *jnana*. The life of a Saiva is one dedicated to Siva. In this, *charya* is dedication of the body to Siva, *kriya*, dedication of the indriyas, *yoga* of the internal karanas (organs), and *jnana* of the self. These four are again considered the worship of Siva in different ways; *charya* is the external worship of the image of Siva *rupa* in the temple; *kriya* is the worship, internal and external, of the formless form (*ruparupa*) of Siva, i.e. the Sivalinga; *yoga* is the internal worship of Siva the formless (*arupa*); and last by *jnana* is the worship of Siva who transcends the three stages of *rupa*, *arupa* and *ruparupa*, not by internal or external processes, but only through the intellect. All the four paths, or *padas* as they are called are to be construed as parts of the *jnana* *marga*.

*Charya* *marga* is manual service in the Siva temple. It includes sweeping the temple floor, washing it, providing lamps, maintaining the flower garden etc, and also doing service to His devotees.

The *kriya* *marga* is the most elaborate one. In essence it is the worship of Siva on the lines laid down in the Sivagamas. The aspirant gathers fragrant flowers for worship and performs a Siva puja in his own house for a personal deity, his atmartha murti. Siva is imagined to be a bright light and His worship is done through thought, word and deed, namely contemplation (*dhyana*) mantra and *kriya*.

The third path is the path of yoga. This is very difficult of comprehension to the lay man. The *ashitanga* yoga with eight steps is merely a pathway to the yoga which seeks to vitalise the Sakti inherent in the individual and take it to the higher levels and make it experience the divine Presence, called *prasaada* yoga.

The *jnana* *marga* is an intellectual process; the *pati jnana* is sought to appear in the *pasu* and thereby confer the competence for the oneness. Penances, *japa* and *dhyana* are progressively higher, one over the other; he who desires ultimate union, should go beyond these, and worship Siva through *jnana*.

Bhakti or surrender to Siva courses through all the four paths.

## BHAKTI MARGA

Bhakti marga consists of a complete renunciation and a total surrender to God in a spirit of absolute love and humility. Although the *bhakti yoga* is mentioned as a separate path higher than all the others, in other systems of philosophy, Saivism does not mention it as a separate *marga*, but considers it as the basic mental state permeating all the four *margas*. Bhakti pervades them all and there is no *charya* or *kriya*, *yoga* or *jnana* without *bhakti*. *Prapatti*, absolute surrender or taking refuge at the feet of God, is a great contribution of Vaishnavism to philosophy; it is indeed embedded in the *bhakti marga* of all religions.

The Saiva Nayanmar (Saints) have all gone along one or the other of the four paths detailed here. But in every walk that they chose, bhakti and absolute surrender to Siva were the chief governing factors guiding their lives. Among all the stories, two are very ancient – the story of Kannappar and the story of Chandesar. The first was an unlettered hunter, who, unable to bear the sight of blood oozing from the eyes of the Sivalingam he was worshipping, dug out his own eyes to replace the affected eyes of the lingam. The other story is about a brahmin boy who was pouring forth milk from the cows left to his care, on a Sivalinga as *abhisheka* and, when his own father kicked the milk pot, he cut asunder the offending foot of his father. These two stories demonstrate the limits to which absolute surrender will take the *bhakta*. The two stories are referred to by saint Manikkavacakar and they may be to back to the centuries B.C.

The greatest bhakta loves God because he cannot but do it. He does not ask for any material benefits or for his own welfare in this world. He converts his whole body into a temple for God and his heart as the sanctum thereof. Worldly pleasures or pains do not exist for him. He craves only for Him, in adversity as well as in prosperity. His presence is his prosperity and His absence is his adversity. He moves and lives in a world of his own, made radiant by an inward light shed by the Spirit enshrined in his heart. This love is a surging from within, which cannot be controlled but only be experienced; severing of all attachment and knowing that God is the only refuge, are only adjuncts, but they, by themselves, do not produce this stage of bhakti.



## MODERN PHILOSOPHERS

Philosophy runs in the veins of the Indian and this religion has a continuous line of great enlightened seers from the Vedic period. Three such prophets of the modern day had been Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-86), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Ramana Maharishi (1879-1950).

Ramakrishna Paramahansa was the unlettered priest of Kali at Dakshinesvar in Bengal who had by initiation from realized gurus, by intensive sadhana and of course by the Grace of Sakti, developed into the greatest teacher of the modern day. He satisfied the hunger of Narendranath to see God and evolved him into Vivekananda who in turn founded the Ramakrishna Mission which is today the greatest spiritual-cum social force in India. He was not a philosopher of the traditional type but one who was in harmony with the whole universe through an internal realization. He was able to radiate this joy and jnana through his homely words unweighted by learned scholarship. His words of love and harmony found an echo in every heart which proclaimed him as the Teacher for all Time.

Aurobindo was not satisfied with the goal of Advaita Vedanta which meant the absorption of the individual soul with the Universal Soul. He desired to bring the Sakti of the Universal soul down to the earth consciousness so that mind, life and matter are transformed and made capable of the Divine on earth. He was again not satisfied with the gospel of social service on humanitarian grounds. He emphasized an essential change in human nature which could root out the cause of all misery and make man the master of his own destiny. *Nishkama karma* according to him does not work for bettering human nature itself. The aim of his teaching was to divinise the whole of humanity by transforming mind, life and matter into a higher level of existence where pure knowledge, universal harmony and divine bliss could reign supreme.

Self-enquiry is the essence of the teachings of Ramana Maharishi. For him the intellectual approach of jnana and the emotional approach of bhakti have the same goal. In both cases 'I' ceases to exist as a separate entity. 'Mine' in *bhakti*, 'I' disappears in *jnana*. Turning inward after long continuous practice, the intellect discovers that some higher power directs it and then surrenders itself to this higher power. "Self reform automatically brings about social reform. Acquire strength by surrender and you will find your surroundings improve in direct proportion to the strength acquired by you."

## SECTION 11

## ART



## MUSIC

Isai (music) was the second division of Tamil letters. All the early commentators like the author of *Kalaviyal urai* and Adiyarkku nallar give elaborate references to *Isai*-Tamil works and grammatical treatises on the subject. A fragment of the Sangham anthology, *Paripadal*, (22 songs out of the traditional 70) is available and it gives the names of 13 composers and 10 musicians who wrote the notations therefor. The songs are composed on Muruha, Tirumal (Vishnu), the river Vaigai and the city of Madurai. However, the metre and the type of poem are totally absent now. *Silappadhikaram* gives us a glimpse into the musical literature and also the grammar of music of the period in some of its chapters but the whole body of that literature and grammar have been lost.

The reason for the disappearance of many books on music and dance is the suppression, during the Kalabhra interregnum, of Tamil classics on music and drama, and on *ahapporul* (love poetry), as tending to lead man away from a life of righteousness.

Music had a marvellous revival in the 7th century onwards through the singing of Tiru Jnanaśambandhar. No doubt all the Saiva canon and the Vaishnava canon from the 7th century to the 9th centuries had been set to music. But it was Sambandhar who carried on an active campaign for Music. He always called himself Jnana Sambandhar, learned in *isai* Tamil. No other acharya campaigned for *isai* as he did. He had sung many varieties of pan (musical tune) and he was also familiar with musical instruments. His influence caught on and from him started the singing of *devaram* in the temples during specific hours and occasions. The Chola Emperors who ruled from the 9th century patronised *devaram* music and gave magnificent grants to temples and singers.

Tamil *isai*, in spite of its chequered career, continued as popular music through the temples and the temple orchestra and to this day it has been existing only in this form. *Devaram* music was played on the Tamilian instrument called *nagasvaram*, which has perpetuated it through the centuries with an unbroken continuity. The fortunes of monarchies changed and, in spite of various religious and political onslaughts by alien powers, the *nagasvaram* instrument had kept alive the soul of Tamil *isai*.

We learn that Kulottunga Chola I was a great musical composer and that his queen Ezhisai vallabhi (the expert in the seven tunes) used to sing his compositions.

Arunagirinathar in the 14-15th century gave a great impetus to the singing of music through his *Tiruppuhal* songs which are the

greatest rhythmic melodious music. Millions sang them in all their social and temple gatherings, and continue to sing so in musical concerts even today.

Under the Nayak and the Mahratta rulers in Tamilnad, Tamil musical composition enters a new phase. What is now called the *kirttanam* was evolved in course of time. The modern *bhajana* was fully influenced by the Mahrattas and was an evolution from the group singing of the Tamils, which had been in vogue through the singing of the *Devaram* and the *Tiruppuhal* songs. Perhaps the first *kirttanam* in the Tamil language was written by a minor poet who sang a *kirttanam* song in 1654 A.D. to celebrate the event of the installation of the image of Tiruccendur Muruha which was thrown into the sea by the Dutch, but reclaimed by Vadamalaiyappa pillai, the administrator of Tirunelveli under Tirumalai Nayak. The next centuries witnessed the evolution of the three first composers of Tamil *kirttanam*, namely Muttu Tandavar, Arunachalak-kavi and Marimutta pillai.

Muttutandavar had music and devotion to Lord Nataraja in his blood and he went on singing *kirttanams* and *padams*. A *padam* is an erotic poem depicting in *kirttanam* form the pining of a love-sick damsel for the love of God. His songs became immediately popular and are the great attraction in the musical concerts even in the twentieth century. They transport one to unknown realms of spiritual yearning and peace and breathe into the audience an atmosphere of solace and comfort, in spite of their being in a love-song form. Most of them are also adapted for dance.

Arunachala kavi of Sikali wrote the *Ramayana* in *kirttana* form) it is a long serious opera, if we may use the term. Tradition has it that St. Tyagaraja was taught these songs by his mother. Marimutta pillai of a village near Sikali had also written a few *padams* which had captured the imagination of the Tamil people by his supplication to Lord Nataraja, as in Muttu Tandavar. Gopala-krishna Bharati is the greatest of the musical composers of the later period. His *Nandanar kirttanam* even excelled Arunachala kavi, both in emotional content and musical appeal. His songs could move a heart of stone even today and, for the period of more than a century and over, they have helped to direct even the uneducated masses along the pathway to God.

The *nagasvaram* and the *vina* are the greatest contribution of Tamil nadu to the world of musical instruments. To this day, *vina*, though in use elsewhere also, could be made only in Tanjavur.



## DANCE

The 'three-divisional' concept of Tamil as *iyal*, *isai* and *natakam* give Dance and Drama as the third division of Tamil. Dance had been there in the culture of the people from the earliest period.

Agastya, the first grammarian, is said to have written a treatise on this branch also, but along with the other parts, this also is not available; the three parts seem to have been lost even at the time of the first commentary-writers. The only work which gives us any glimpse of the conception of the dance in Tamil of the period two thousand years ago is *Silappadhikaram*; its two commentaries, coming probably 800-900 years after the book itself, seem to have had just a peep into the very wide range of the literature on music and dance of the *Silappadhikaram* period and nothing more, because almost all the texts had ceased to exist by the period of the commentaries.

The Kalabhras held sway over Madurai for about three hundred years and had wiped out many aspects of Tamil letters. That is the reason we do not have a single ancient classical treatise on music and dance, although the commentators mention scores of such works and say that they had been lost.

Details had been elaborated for the dancer, the dance instructor, the music master, the composer, the drummer, the flutist, the *yal*-player, the stage, the inauguration and the dance. About a hundred types of *kuttu* or dance have been casually mentioned by the commentators. Dance was not then confined to a particular class in society; it was an occasion for joy and celebration among all classes – the cowherds, the hunters, the gipesis etc.

The concept of dance had taken root in Tamil literature and had had a great elaboration, probably from the concept of Lord Nataraja as the Cosmic Dancer. The concept of Nataraja is purely Tamilian and this has passed on from religion and legend to literature also. Nataraja is said to have performed seven types of dances. Other classical dances performed by various deities are eleven, from *alliyam* to *kodukotti*.

These dances are *Kodukotti* by Bhairavi, *Pandarangam* by Siva, *Alliyam* by Krishna, *Mal* by Vishnu (Krishna), *Tudi* and *Kudai* by Muruha, *Kudam* by Krishna, *Pedi* by Kaman, *Marakkal* by Durga, *Pavai* by Lakshmi and *Kadaiyam* by Indrani. The occasion for the *kuttu* and the parts of each are also mentioned by the writers.

All these details had been taken up in literature and we find in *Silappadhikaram* mention of the dances and a large variety of

types of *kuttu*, *abhinaya* or pose pictures by the hand and the fingers, and presentation of emotions and sentiments through silent postures of the organs of the body including the hands and the fingers. All these had been evolved as an independent and extensive art or science of dance through the Tamil language.

Remnants of that dance had been revived and given a new lease of life under the Imperial Cholas from the 9th to the 13th centuries, by the institution of the temple pipers and temple dancers. What was left of those dances, after the Muslim onslaughts of the 14th century and later, has been handed down to us by the pipers who were the temple musicians and the temple dancers in the form of the *bharatanatya* and *abhinaya* which we have today. There was a *Bharata sastra* in Tamil according to *Adiyarkku nallar*. *Bharata sastra* and similar Sanskrit works which are spoken of today are but a natural evolution from the ancient Tamil dance and dance-literature. *Bharata* probably hailed from *Tamilnad*.

Manuals of grammar and literature tell us that there were different troupes of dancers such as the *panar*, *viraliyar*, *kuttar* and *porunar* in the Sangham age and the period immediately following; they specialised in music and dance. They flourished under the patronage of kings and local chieftains. But when social life underwent a change during the Kalabhra rule, then during the days of the Nayanmar and the Alvar, and lastly, under the Chola administration, the order of the *panas* gradually disappeared and with them that ancient dance of Tamil literature. It had however a religious revival under the Chola emperors as an adjunct of temple worship and in that form, it has continued to this day.

Insignia of honour shown to the major deities in the temple are 16 in number. Of these, vocal music, instrumental music and dance are the last three. The Chola monarchs had made liberal endowments to the temples for the maintenance of the temple musicians and dancers and they had enabled them to live on in service to the temple without being much affected by the political upheavals in the land. The dancers in particular had dedicated their dance art to the deity enshrined in the temple and thus it had grown into a divine art. The modern awakening in dance has however pulled down this art from its high divine pedestal and made it a commercial product to be sold in a democratic market even like the Tamil music that is being sold. Love of one's own art and culture should not make one bring down the standards and ideals.



## SCULPTURE

The Tamil people have been held to be one of the greatest sculptors in the world. As against Grecian sculpture which was generally realistic and materialistic, Indian and particularly Tamilian sculpture was idealistic and spiritualistic. Sculpture here has a continuous history and begins probably from a pre-Christian era as evidenced by literary references although we do not have specimens from that early period. The earliest sculptures could have been in wood and stucco but due naturally to the ravages of time, they have not survived.

Sculptures in the Tamil country have been worked on two materials - stone and bronze. Although silver and gold were there in plenty in the country particularly in the Chola period, they were always discarded because their intrinsic worth as valuable metals would suppress any art value.

Historically, the Pallava cave and rock-cut temples have the earliest sculptures of celestial figures like the *dvarapalas* guarding the entrance to the shrine. They are leaning on their clubs and the gradual development indicates an attempt at perfecting the physical form. Yet their general characteristic is one of idealism in total effect rather than anatomical detail. Ornamental decoration is not much. Deities are represented with their weapons. Many forms of Siva and Vishnu are represented along with Subrahmanya and Sakti but Ganesa is said to be absent.

In the same period, the Pandiyas in the South had also been scooping out cave temples though in a smaller number and their stylistic details are similar.

The race of *stapatis* (sculptors) was perhaps gaining experience and skill in idealistic portrayal and we find the iconographic art blossoming to the full under the Chola Emperors in the 9th-13th centuries. Sculpture is now fully detached from architecture and we find a greater rhythm, perfection in outline and delicacy in overall effect. Strength, character and grace now begin to dwell on the figures and the countenances of important deities are resplendent with a benign grace which seems to confer solace on the worshippers. The songs of the Nayanmar have been responsible in training the fingers of the sculptors in depicting softness and a humanistic concern. Ornaments and decorative devices now multiply.

Probably there were several styles of portrayal even within the Chola period but they all represent not only a freedom of pose but firmness and vigour in delineation. In the later Chola por-

trayals, delicacy of form is lost and the total effect continues to develop.

With the fall of the Chola empire, the greatest patronage to this noble art disappeared and the rise of the Vijayanagar empire and after its own fall, the rule of the Nayaks, provided some kind of a substitution in patronage. The earlier aesthetic quality of sculpture now gives place to thematic variation. Delicacy is lost and figures now tend to be rigid and formal. The benign grace that the Chola sculpture was able to bestow on the countenances could not be recaptured in the representations which are now as a rule expressionless. With the withdrawal of patronage, the sculptors themselves may be considered to have lost their spiritualistic inspiration.

Where earlier figures had all a celestial portrayal, now we have realistic human representation. Even celestial figures like Manmata and Rati are portrayed as humans.

The Nayak period is followed by the foreign aggression which snubbed out entirely the iconographic art.

Tamilnadu is famous for its bronze icons. Thousands of images of the various deities are placed in worship in all the temples of Tamilnad, big or small, Saiva or Vaishnava. *Silappadhikaram* mentions the Silver Dance Hall of Nataraja at Madurai (2nd century A.D.) and naturally this pre-supposes the wider known Golden Hall of Chidambaram. A Sakti image from Adichanallur is considered to date back to a period 3000 years ago. Buddha images of the early Christian era have also been unearthed. Side by side with stone sculptures, metal casting had flourished. Probably it was not given great importance by the Pallavas who concentrated on rock-cut temples to begin with. Nataraja is rare under them.

The Cholas were the greatest patrons and developers of the metal art. The Nataraja form embodying the highest tenets of the philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta is the noblest artistic symbol of the Tamil people. Every temple possesses a Nataraja and each has its own characteristic deviation in the form which has its own beauty. The six-foot Nataraja of Tiru Nallam is a marvel in size and in casting. Thiruvallangadu Nataraja is another marvel, where the entire weight is supported and balanced only by a single point of contact of the right foot with the base. Besides the most familiar Ananda tandava poses, there are some other equally handsome forms.



## ARCHITECTURE

The temple architecture of Tamilnad is world famous. It has brought upon the Tamil people the title 'a race of temple builders'. Architecture in Tamilnad means only temple architecture as against the later Muslim tradition of sepulchral architecture. It is to the lasting glory of the Tamil monarchs that they did not build huge palaces for themselves but built lasting edifices in stone for God, the King of kings.

Early literature refers to the temples at Madurai, Sri Rangam, Tiruchendur and many other places, many of which had been rendered glorious by later stone construction. Kochengat Chola (5th century A.D.) built 78 temples, probably in brick and mortar (according to St. Appar). The later Cholas rebuilt most of them as magnificent edifices in stone.

The Pallava Emperors of Kanchipuram are famous for their cave temples and rock-cut temples. These began in the reign of Mahendra Varma (590-630) and continued in all their glory even after Rajasimha (686-705). Mahendra varma had caused cave and rock temples to be made in more than a dozen places. The cave temples of his day are simple in design and decoration, apparently because they were the first attempts in the history of Tamilnad. Sculptural decoration also is not much. Mahendra varma declares that he is constructing a temple for Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, without the use of the conventional building materials like brick, mortar, timber or metal.

His style was followed by his son Narasimha varma who added more embellishments. Elephants, lions and *yalis* (gajasimha) are introduced in the pillars and the columns. Mamallai or Mahabalipuram as it is today called is one of the great typical achievements of his period which were added to in the days of Rajasimha.

Narasimha introduced rock-cut temples and these actually try to reproduce the finish of the contemporary ordinary brick and mortar and timber structures.

The Kalugumalai rock temple of the Pandiyas was contemporary with the Pallava monoliths and is perhaps the only non-Pallava monolith in the Tamil country.

The next architectural development was the structural temple, which used rocks and stone, cut and designed to size and shape not *in situ* like the ancient ones but transported over scores of miles and piled up one over the other like any brick and mortar temple. Kanchipuram, the capital city of the Pallavas contains specimens of many stylistic and architectural variations of the Pallavas. The

Kailasanatha temple of Kanchi and the shore temple at Mahabalipuram are fine specimens of the early structural temples which contain perhaps the beginnings of the *gopuras* which were an important feature under the later Cholas. Here the outer walls are fully carved with deities and celestial figures.

With the Chola supremacy from the middle of the 9th century to the end of the 13th century, the Pallavas disappeared. The Chola period was a glorious age of temple construction. They ruled over the entire Tamilnad and their temple building activity extended even over the peripheral areas now included in modern Karnataka, Andhra and Kerala.

The first phase of Chola temple architecture extends up to the accession of Rajaraja I (983 A.D.) and this naturally reflects the influence of Pallava architecture. Here the lion and *yali* motifs are absent. Sub-shrines are introduced and there is greater elaboration in the temple complex. *Vimanas* dominate the entire structure. *Gopuram* is inconspicuous. Niches on the outer walls of the *garbhagriha* are dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, south, west and north respectively. Siva is in the form of Dakshinamurti, and Vishnu most often gives place to Lingotbhava.

The Tanjavur temple of Rajaraja is the most magnificent example of the second period. *Gopuras* in the same direction are introduced. Separate Devi shrine is now added. A maturity and rich lavishness of style are evident. Examples are Darasuram, Tirubhuvanam and Chidambaram. *Vimanas* gradually decline in importance, giving pride of place to the *gopura*.

*Gopuras* become all important in the third phase. Pillared *mandapas* are many. Chariot-style halls with wheels, horses and elephants attached, representing Siva's march on Tiripura, are frequent. *Gopuras* grow in height and are a great attraction for miles around. Devi shrine becomes fixed.

Pandiya temples follow the Chola model without much variation. The Vijayanagar period introduced many new additions and many new temples. Their contribution is noticeable in most important shrines like Chidambaram, Sri Ranganam, Kanchi, Tiru Annamalai, Madurai, Kumbhakonam, Vellore etc. Temple rituals increase and so also the *mandapas*. Their pillars are rich in carvings. The niches are left empty, being mere ornamentation.

The Nayaks continued the Vijayanagar pattern. *Gopuras* rise to seven and eleven storeys. Corridors multiply.

After the Nayakas, there was the western domination which killed all architectural development.



## MAHABALI PURAM (MAMALLAPURAM)

About 35 miles south of the city of Madras on the coast is Mamalla puram, a flourishing sea port city of the Pallava Empire in the 7th century. It was not only a sea port, but also an architectural museum, born out of the imagination of successive Pallava Emperors who adorned the throne of Kanchi. Today it is an ugly straggling township, haunted by hundreds of uglier American half-clad hippis, in all their filthy habits, to whom the entire population seems to cater.

But in the past, it was a thriving city, having a large overseas trade, pulsating with the life of the Pallava period resounding to the sound of the hammers of the architects and sculptors who strove to give shape in stone for the dreams of the Pallava monarchs during a period of two hundred years. The place had two shrines of Vishnu - Mallai - Talasayanam and Mallai - Jalsayanam, of which the latter due to erosion by the sea had been removed and rebuilt in the middle of the town. This has been sanctified in the hymns of St. Tirumangai alvar in a full song. Bhutattalvar (6th century) refers to Mamallai. These indicate that the name of the place was *Mamallai*, now corrupted into Mahabalipuram. The foreign administration had given it the name, *Seven pagodas*.

Emperor Mahendra varma had an inspiration to scoop out art figures out of all the rocks in the place. He started the work and his son Narasimha carried on the sculptural work extensively. Narasimha was the great hero of history who vanquished the Chalukya Emperor Pulikesin II who had in his day defeated even King Harsha whose empire extended almost to the whole of North India. The work was continued till the days of Rajasimha (686-705 A.D.) All these pay a lasting tribute to the artistic imagination of the monarchs who probably had these figures in their minds and had them transferred through equally imaginative sculptors on stone.

The sculptural wealth of the place has earned for it the name, *the Sculptor's Paradise*. This wealth can be examined under the several heads the rock cut temples, the monoliths, sculptures on rock faces, built-in temples and the Saluvankuppam treasures.

The Mummurti cave has three sanctums dedicated to Muruha, Siva and Vishnu. All the three are in the standing posture, with devotees at their feet. Siva is on the sanctum rear wall, where a Siva linga has also been installed. Muruha had been probably wrongly taken as Brahma and hence the name *Mummurti* cave. Several elephant forms have been scooped out on the rocks close by.

The *Kodikal mandapa* is a shrine for Durga, but the sanctum has no figure in it. This was constructed by Rajasimha for Siva. What is called Ramanuja mandapam has nothing to do with Ramanuja. This has a mandapa in front with three sanctums at the base. There are *dvarapalakis* at the entrance. The view is that the Vaishnavas had tampered with the original structure and made it look like a Vaishnava shrine. The Somaskanda forms here had long ago been demolished. The Varaha mandapa has some fine sculptures, probably of the last phase of Mamalla. The Adivaraha cave temple started by Mamalla was completed in the days of Paramesvara. Varahamurti here is in stucco.

The single rock *vimanas* known as the *Pancha Pandavar rathas* are each hewn out of single rocks as also the two called the Pidari rathas, Ganesa ratha, and the Valaiyan-kottai ratha. All these indicate the fine workmanship of the period depicting several types of architecture like *nagara*, *dravida*, and *vesara*. Bhima was the mightiest of the Pandavas and so the biggest ratha has been named after him as Bhima ratha. It has a *gaja prishtha vimana* and the standing elephant by its side serves to remind one of this. A long rock seems to have been cut into three parts, the first forming the Draupadi and Arjuna rathas, the second the Bhima ratha, the last forming the three tiered Dharma raja ratha.

Another rock close by had served as the Nakula and Sahadeva rathas. Besides these, the panels are also remarkable for their puranic sculptures such as the story of Bhuvārha, Tirivikrama measuring out the three worlds with His two feet, the destruction of Mahishasura, the Anantasayi etc. The penance of Arjuna (called also the penance of Bhaghirata for getting down the Ganga from the Celestial worlds) is one of the most inspiring figures.

The shore temple is a continuation of three temples of which two were for Siva and the third for Talasayanap - Perumal. When the Vimana collapsed due to the action of the waves, the linga was damaged. On the back wall we find as usual Somaskanda murti. The reclining Vishnu here has only two arms. This temple is built with cut stones but the stones, like those at the Kailasanatha temple, are an inferior type and so have deteriorated through wind and rain. Being actually on the sea front, action of saline wind has done great havoc. At a short distance from Mahabalipuram is the 'Tiger Cave' of Saluvan kuppam. Probably it was an unfinished temple of Kotravai, where we have terrifying figures of *yalis*.

Concluding, we may say that this place is verily an art museum of the Pallava dynasty dedicated to both Siva and Vishnu.



## PAINTING

Painting is the first and the simplest of the fine arts. Probably there were treatises on this subject; the commentator, Adiyarkku nallar mentions an *Oviyanul*, a treatise now lost. Certain arts are difficult of preservation and so we do not have any evidences of early arts. Painting could not be preserved easily. Great paintings naturally perish due to the absence of preserving facilities. But yet the references to painting are quite interesting and well worth a survey.

The unrequited lover in love poetry, draws a picture of his lady love and threatens to mount the palmyrah horse, *madal-erutal*, which will end in his own death, unless she is wedded to him.

*Paripadal* gives us a view of a picture gallery in the Muruha temple of Parankunram. "Visitors to the temple pay a visit to the picture gallery and look at the pictures. One points to the picture of the Solar system that is revolving round the pole star. Another, when his wife pointed to some pictures, says 'this is Rati and this is Kaman.' Another says: "This is the form of the cat with which Indra tried to escape from the wrath of Goutama rishi; this is Ahalya; this is Goutama; this is the stone form taken by Ahalya when cursed by Goutama." Many such art galleries adorned Tirupparankunram temple. This is a remarkable description from the Sangham poetry which indicates the well developed art of painting and the existence of art galleries, frequented by the public.

We have had a large number of fresco paintings during the historical periods. The Ajanta frescos of the Pallava period and the Sigiriya paintings were all of TAMILIAN origin. It is possible that all early temples which were in brick and mortar had quite a number of paintings in colour, just as they had sculpture in three dimensions, but when the brick and mortar structures gradually were replaced by stone structures after the days of Kocchengat Chola the paintings had been destroyed. However we do have a few left in such places as Sittannavasal, Kailasanathar temple of Kanchi, the Tanjavur temple and a few more on the stone surface itself. Five *sabhas* (dance halls) had been dedicated to Lord Nataraja in Tamil nadu in different places as the Golden, Silver, Copper, Gem and Chitra halls. Of these *Chitra sabha* is the Sabha in Courtallam in Tirunelveli district famous for its waterfalls. This is a separate hall not within the temple but away from it at some distance. Nataraja is here worshipped on a picture in colours painted on the wall.

Sittannavasal frescoes (7th century) were found on the ceiling, walls and pillars of the temple here. They depict a large variety of motifs like dancing damsels, a royal pair, a lotus tank and devotees plucking lotus flowers. Though subject to the ravages of time and neglect, they still astound us with the skill of the artist in colour work, in proportion, depth of conception and an idealism in realistic portrayal.

The Kailasanathar temple frescoes have almost disappeared because of the faulty choice of the rock in the temple construction. But even the remnants thereof enable us to imagine the superior skill in the figures of the early artist.

A new type of painting, known as the Tanjavur glass painting, had come into vogue probably from the days of the Mahratta rule in Tanjavur where deities are portrayed in colour and gold on plain glass panes. The figures are painted on the back of the glass and are exposed to view from the front. Hence great care and skill is required on the part of the painter in super-imposing the colours one after the other in order to produce a correct total effect. This is still a rare preserve of some families in Tanjavur. The finished work has a delicacy and charm of its own. The picture is always kept in puja in the homes.

Later day Nayak-period paintings are to be seen in temples such as Chidambaram, Courtallan, Madurai, Kumbhakonam and Sri Rangam. The picture of Mangammal witnessing the *Tirukkalyanam* festival in the Minakshi temple has considerable historical significance.

Like every other fine art, painting also had been oriented towards temple culture. During a temple Kumbhabhishekam, the power on the Vimana is drawn into a picture of the *vimana* by mantras and later transferred from the picture to the vimana as re-constituted. In the same manner when there are no sculptural dwarapalakas at the entrance to the sanctum, one on either side is drawn as a picture and the consecration work then carried on.

The Tanjavur Temple frescoes are depictions of legendary stories like the ascent of Sundarar to the heavens and the forms of Siva. These were first drawn in outline and then filled in colours. The facial parts, the fingers, the multi-designed garments, the jewellery and even the ornaments of the elephant and the horse will be cherished in the memory of the visitor for a long period.



## HANDICRAFTS

The Tamil people had been votaries at the shrine of Beauty. All art and all man's handiworks were dedicated to God and so whatever he produced had to be an object of beauty. Things of utility from the humblest to the highest were made into things of aesthetic finish. All their handicrafts display this element of beauty in their making.

Cotton fabrics are the most common among wearing apparel and they were indigenous to Tamil nad. Just as many places, towns and rural parts are noted for their weaving today, even in the distant past many places were celebrated for their weaving industry. Textiles were exported to many foreign countries which had never known cotton. They were of such fine quality that many of the delicate varieties were almost transparent. One writer in Rome says that it is immodest for any woman to wear the Tamilian fine cotton unless it be in seven folds. This cotton was such a craze there that a considerable amount of gold was drained out of the country for the imports and so an edict prohibiting the import was passed. Lace work, silken dress and many tailored items are also among the early textiles. The Tamilnad saris have been the greatest attraction from the past to this day. Dyeing of cotton and silk naturally had been of a high order, using only natural ingredients and herbal colouring material.

A high quality of bronze or bell-metal household utensils had been evolved by hand. They were non-corrosive. The quality of bronze produced can be imagined from the fact that the polished bronze surface served as the common mirror in ladies boudoir. Temple images in bronze and jewellery in gold and silver naturally helped to develop the art of the metal worker.

Jewellery was worn by women and children as in the present day and also by men. Head gear, rings for the ear and the nose, necklaces round the neck, arm bands at the shoulders and arms, bangles for the forearm, belts and trinkets round the waist and many types of anklets for the ankle as well as rings for the fingers and the toes were the order of the day. Except those on the ankle which were generally of silver, the others were all of gold, inlaid and studded with the classical nine varieties of gems.

In the field of armoury, India was the first nation to use iron and steel for arms, spears and lances, daggers and swords. In the middle ages many Tamilnad cities were noted for the quality of their steel swords and spears which were in great demand in other

lands. They were also artistically finished with fine designs on the handles.

The Tamil people had expert knowledge of a few scores of timber, grown in their own home gardens and on the village common and they had specific uses for the different woods. Beginning from the smallest ladle in the home to the highest work of the wood art like the temple car, there were a hundred uses for wood and these were all done by the village carpenter where utility and art were inseparably combined. Every village carpenter was an artist with a deep knowledge of local timber. From the smallest pen-knife to the large cot and almirah every article had some concept of art worked into its components.

Glass painting was a rare work of art, now dying out. Many forms of deities are worked on the surface of the glass panes and these are kept as objects of worship in the home. The many colours used therein never fade. Gold and precious stones were also used in them. They are called Tanjavur glass picture work.

When there were crowned monarchs, there was also an army of elephants. But now the elephant is a curiosity. No ivory could be available and the art has faded out. But it is a finely developed art in Kerala even today.

Kora mat weaving is a well developed handicraft in all river basins. But the mat weaving at Pattamadai in Tirunelveli district is a wonderful fine art and a luxury. A very large mat could still be folded like a hand kerchief and kept in the small pocket. Basket, rattan work, pottery and carpet-making are some of the others.

Fashioning of the *nagasvaram*, *tambura*, the drum, *mrdangam*, *vina*, and the like are other great items of handicrafts calling forth both a technical skill in the work and a skill of precision in the musical art. Musical instruments called for fine knowledge and skill in tanning and preparing leather for the drums and strings for the stringed instruments. In a later day, leather puppets were fashioned and coloured out of tender deer skin.

Agricultural implements like the spade, the sickle, the plough and many others are the combined work of the blacksmith and the carpenter.

Pearl-diving and the stringing of pearls were famous occupations in Pandinad. The conch shells were delicately cut and carved as bangles and worn by married women and girls. The bangles were finely carved with artistic designs and were inlaid with gems. They would easily break, like the modern glass bangles. Conch bangles are even today symbols of the married state in Bengal.



## SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The Tamil people have gone down in history as great temple builders, as great navigators, as great irrigation engineers and as great town planners. All these aspects require a considerable skill in various spheres of science and technology. The fact that they traded their cloth, spices and pearls in such distant places as China, Greece and Rome does reflect to their credit in the mastery of navigational science.

The Grand Anicut built by King Karikal Chola two thousand years ago to stem the surplus floods of the Kaveri and for its distribution along hundreds of supply channels across the entire delta is a marvel of both the engineering and irrigational sciences. The dam constructed so long ago on very insecure soil still stands firm and discharges its original functions.

Many scientific devices were in use in warfare. The forces entrenched within a fort had many levers and other devices for throwing incendiaries and death-dealing balls against the advancing or the besieging armies. There were other traps to grapple with those that mounted the fort walls and hack them to pieces. There was another mechanical sword which, when set in motion, could go on cutting down the advancing forces like a modern sten gun.

Teraiyar was a reputed brain surgeon. It is recorded that he opened up the skull, drained the fluid accumulated in the brain and then replaced the skull using herbal antiseptics and binding material. The development of the embryo in the womb has been correctly recorded even in lay writing, from the first month to the day of child birth. Similarly toxicology had also been a developed medical science.

Sugar mills dotted the country-side. *Chintamani* gives an account of a flying machine finished by an engineer, which the queen was able to pilot. An emperor had a watch (8th century) on a chain round his neck. It has been given the modern name *gadikai aram*.

There was a mechanical swimming pool in the royal palaces with an automatic device for filling it with water, for stopping the inflow when full and for draining it when necessary. Splitting of the atom has been mentioned by the poet Kambar. Many are similar instances which show us the advanced knowledge of the Tamil people in matters of Science and Technology.

## SECTION 12

# CULTURE



## THE TERM HINDU

The name Hindu is not an Indian term nor is the very name India itself an Indian term. This land was known in classical lore as Bharata kanda, the land ruled by Bharata, the son of Dushyanta and Sakuntala. Travellers to India by land had to enter the land through the Khyber pass in the northwest. The territory next to the pass was fed in the ancient period by the River Sindhu and its six tributaries and it was then called the *Sapta Sindhu*. Foreigners, notably the Persians and the Greeks, who came to Bharat called this land, the land beyond the River Sindhu (Indus in their language) as India, the people of this land as the Hindus, and the faith of that people as the Hindu faith. Thus the names India and Hindu stuck to the land and to its people and their religion.

The religion of India then had no need to give itself a name. Only when outsiders wanted to refer to it, they had to specify it by some name and the name Hindu was evolved in this manner. The Hindu religion had been designated as the *Sanatana dharma*, the eternal religion, implying thereby not only the continuity but also the fact that true religion knows no age. It is co-extensive with life. This again implies that Hinduism does not owe its origin to any prophet. No date for the founding of this religion could be posited.

Probably even before the Hindu religion took shape, there was a religion and culture in the extreme south of India inhabited by the Tamil people. Research workers have now been able to find many traces of that ancient Tamil religion and culture in the excavated finds in Mohenjodaro and Harappa. Hence we shall not be wrong if we say that the new Hindu religion and culture is a blend of the more ancient Tamil religion and culture and a new incoming religion and culture based on Sanskrit.

The people here at a remote period followed the Vedas. So they called themselves, if at all they ever felt the need to designate themselves, as the *Vaidikas*, and called their religion as the *Vaidika* religion. *Vaidika* only means that this religion holds as its authority the Veda, the spiritual experience of the great sages of ancient India. The Vaidika religion as understood today is composed of many different sects such as Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktaism and so on. Hinduism means the Vaidika religion as against the Jain and the Buddhist religions which deny the authority of the Vedas and so are termed *a-vaidika*.

Hinduism holds all births as equal but the smritis, ethical law books, had introduced the *varna* system, making one caste

high and another low. There was in reality no *varna* system in Tamilnad; there were of course castes based on vocations in life, but this did not make one high and another low. Many later Tamil books speak of the *varna* system but that is only because they desired to fall in line with the Sanskritists.

Unlike most of the world religions, Hinduism is not a closed religion but an open religion. It does even today allow itself to be influenced by progressive and modern views: it does not shut its doors against them, but refuses to be blown off its feet by any kind of revolutionary concepts. Hinduism does not believe in primordial evil. It does believe that there is a spark of the divine even in the most evil and under favourable conditions this spark could be kindled into a flame of goodness to scorch away all evil.

The charge of other worldliness is often laid against Hinduism, because most Hindus do not fight evil but stoically put up with it. The truth is that there is an inherent element in the Hindu concept that evil will never prevail. Evil is not the essence of reality. Evil can be transcended and that is the goal. Though much is made of *moksha* in Hinduism it is not some thing to be 'enjoyed' in another world after death. It is a state of mental experience, of bliss or pain to be experienced here, on this earth, perhaps in this birth itself or in another birth hereafter.

The main faith of Hinduism is briefly told. There is only One God. He is all Powerful but yet He is all Mercy. He is all good and He never dispenses any evil or any punishment. The soul is eternal and it experiences pain or pleasure not through any predestined law, but through its own attachment. Attachment can result in both. Both are just a condition of the mind and the cultivated mind is not swayed by either, but stays without any attachment, like a drop of water on the lotus leaf. This state is not easy to achieve but every one has to strive for it. This body is perishable but not the soul. When the soul's experiences in this one birth are not over but have to be continued, this body is discarded and a new one is given. This is called re-birth. The total essence of previously performed actions, called karma, govern the present birth but man has his own will to do good and eschew evil and thereby cause the accumulated karma to be in essence good. Even good karma will give its fruits and they have to be experienced. The way to get rid of karma is to experience it, dedicating everything to God and having no attachment towards the result. The reduction of karma to nought stops all future births.



## CULTURE

Culture comes of cultivation. It is the adherence to certain mental and spiritual values which had been handed down in a race through several centuries or even millennia. *Satyam vaada, dharmam chara, ma anrutam vadet* (speak the truth, do the righteous act, never speak falsehood) is one aspect of culture. Culture is acquired through family training, religious belief, education, tradition and literature and art. Culture is a subtle instrument shaping man in self-control and restraining him from self-indulgence. It cures him from meanness, dishonesty and cruelty. It creates in him love of others, consideration for others and their rights, tolerance of others' faults and implants in him a certain indefinable humility which takes him near to the divine.

It is culture that makes community life pleasant and radiates joy in social life. Kind words and a smiling countenance go with the personality of the cultured man.

The culture of the individual grows in concentric circles and not only envelops all that are within its circumference but also evokes cultured behaviour in others outside. The truly cultured cannot but fully influence society around and the world has been made possible to live in only through the uplifting influence of cultured people.

Pilgrimages are an important feature of the culture of India. They are undertaken to important shrines, rivers, festivals and even hill tops, in the name of religion. An example is the Mahamagham festival of Kumbhakonam in Tamilnad where all the great rivers of India are considered to have a mystic confluence in the Mahamagham tank. The last festival in 1980 witnessed a gathering of more than two million people in this small town. Such gatherings are the most powerful integrating forces in Indian culture. People come here to see a cross section of India at all levels by language, tradition, ways of worship, caste, race and even by religion and thus bring home to every one the basic truth of the saying *Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti* – that which is One, wise men speak of it in many ways, so succinctly expressed by the Tamil Saint Tirumular *Onre kulamum oruvane devanum* – God is one and mankind is One.

India, by virtue of its geographical and physical isolation had been able to maintain and develop its culture through centuries when align impact thurled itself through the Khyber pass. But South India was relatively almost free from the harmful influences of the impact for a long period. The 14th century saw the invasion

of Madurai and its destruction but the people had immediately regained their poise and continued their development. Only from the 17th and 18th centuries did the south experience the alien impact through seafaring traders on the western and the eastern coasts. Until then the nation had developed a large measure of uniformity and unity in all aspects of culture and human aspirations.

Culture recognized freedom of thought. Hindu Culture had been recognizing speculations and bold investigations in the realms of abstract philosophy, as is evidenced by the many systems of the *darsanas*. Even in the Tamil language philosophy is so varied and vast and that itself is a manifestation of Culture. Tolerance and hospitality is another vital ingredient of culture. The two together lead to the ultimate feature peculiar to the Hindu fold, namely the unshakable faith in the immanence of Divinity. This faith is fully maintained among the unsophisticated folk; but education, sophistication, fast living and modern influences have tended to erase this faith in an urban community, but yet it does persist and that is the true mark of Hindu culture.

One of the main characteristics of Hindu culture is its symbolism. This will be clear in the realm of art. All art, all religion, all worship is symbolic. We never have any realistic representation in our culture or religion. Art is never a real portrayal. The subject is idealised and the idealised portrayal is symbolically represented in sculpture, painting and even poetry. Religion is the adoption and practice of such an idealism and symbolism. Religion here is not a specific creed or a dogma but a wider humanism based on love and tolerance, charity and understanding, and a recognition of the divine spark in every one.

The Indian nation consists of a large number of communities which are vegetarian by birth for millennia. This can be explained only by the faith in karma and rebirth. All creation of God is one and there is no difference among the three kingdoms the human, the animal and bird, and the plant. This explains the high status society gives to those who abstain from meat. Sacrifice and austerity commanded a following in our country and the real beggar had some respect. All these are the result of the impact of our philosophy and religion on society.

Nations have their culture impressed upon all aspects of their life and art. The foregoing pages highlight some of the facets of Hindu culture among the Tamil people, as they were evolved through a continuous history of more than two and a half millennia of *recorded history*.



## HINDU DHARMA

As a great writer once remarked, 'Hinduism is not only a view of life but also a way of life.' It is concerned with the three entities called variously in the different sects as *pasam*, *pasu*, and *Pati*; *prakriti*, *purusha* and *Isvara*; *achit*, *chit* and *Isvara*; *maya*, *jivatma* and *Paramatma* etc. Hindu dharma expounds the means by which good conduct can lead to God-realization or Godliness. *Dharma* is the backbone of both social living and religion.

Three *gunas* are posited for man in action-*tamasa* (slothfulness), *rajasa* (aggressive and egoistic nature) and *satvika* (balanced, dedicated and peaceful nature). The *satvika* stage is one where man has conquered himself and that is the stage to which man has to strive for.

A *karma yogi* does his duty with complete detachment. He derives neither pleasure nor does he abhor duty, but does it in a disinterested manner. Such a person is well defined in all the Tamil classics. The householder who does his duty to society in this manner is the prop of society. *Dharma* in the sense of duty here is conformity with the law of universal welfare.

*Dharma* in ordinary language means righteousness. Hindu dharma is an ideal of conduct blended with *karma* (action), and woven into its fabric are religion and philosophy. Religion and philosophy are eternal but not the laws which are represented by the *smritis*. The *smritis* arose at a point of time in the evolution of society and at a level of society marked by space and have no absolute validity in time and space. What was once a code of conduct for a limited society at a particular point of its evolution cannot be a code for all time, applicable to all climes. But dharma in a broad sense is applicable to all, at all times and climes. Dharma confers on every man the right to live, to receive education, to enjoy freedom; he has naturally to respect these three rights in the others. The sense of right and wrong is there common to all, and the true conscience of man dictates this to him, provided the conscience is not killed by drink and similar evils.

Virtues like truthfulness, honesty, non-violence, sweetness in words, humility, non-coveting, respect for elders, parents and acharyas and for the law etc., chivalry towards women, capacity to work hard, fearlessness, a spirit of justice, non-gluttony are common to all. The *puranas* and the *itihasas* came to emphasise these and similar virtues. Great books like *Tirukkural* preach this basic code of virtues for *all mankind* for *all time* but the *Smritis*, claimed to be *Dharmasastras*, do not preach it for all

mankind but claim superiority for one over the other, thereby denying freedom and basic equality. This is no stigma to real Hinduism but only to the later false accretions in the religion.

The *varnasrama dharma* is made of two features - one *varna* and two *asrama*. There is nothing wrong with *asrama* but everything is wrong with *varna* as it is observed today. The *varnas* mentioned by the *smritis* are four - Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. The *Brahmin* was one whose duty was *only to learn and impart learning to all* the others. This is in theory quite simple and grand. The *Kshatriya* was the protector of the tribe or community against depredations from the others, when the community was small. The *Vaisya* was the giver of food and the trader. The *Sudra* was the one who placed his physical service at the disposal of the community. At the beginning this arrangement seemed to be a happy distribution of labour, but as times passed on, these hardened into rigid castes, in descending order of value, as superior and inferior, and denying to the lower classes the fundamental right to freedom, existence and learning. The *varna dharma* is an outmoded scourge of the past, no longer relevant in an evolved, democratic, free and scientific society.

The *varna* system never applied to Tamilnadu. There were brahmins here, but *no kshatriyas* - the Tamil monarchs Sera Chola Pandiyas never called themselves Kshatriyas, - no *vaisyas* and no *sudras*. There were a number of *castes* distinguished by their professions, but among them one was not high and another low. The lowest *pana* has as free an entry into the royal court as the brahmin minister. There was no *sudra* in Tamilnad and the term is anathema to the concept of *dharma* here.

*Asramas* were four - *brahmacharya* the bachelor student, *grahasta* (*illarathan*) the householder, *vanaprasta* (the aged man and wife who have come away from family ties) and the *sannyasi*, ascetic who had renounced every thing - property and possessions as well as wife and children. Tamilnad has recognized the right of its castes for all the *asramas*. (Caste is not *varna*.) But it held the householder and the ascetic in the greatest esteem equally.

The house holder's *dharma* was to consider himself as the trustee of his wealth for the welfare of the community - he was to use it for propitiation of the spirits of his departed ancestors, the Divinity in the temple, the unknown guest, relatives, and lastly for his own family (*Kural*). A Sangham poem would say that the use of wealth is in the distribution of it and the above concept of utilising the wealth for the purpose of the five well exemplifies this.



## THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Gita is song; that is the Song Celestial; Bhagavad-expounded by Bhagavan Krishna. When Arjuna was brought into the battle field of Kurukshetra by his charioteer Krishna to face the army of Duryodhana, Arjuna felt a strong revulsion to fight, saying that he did not want the kingdom by killing his kinsmen, respected elders and preceptors. Krishna then taught him his duty as a Kshatriya, as a warrior, which was simply to do his duty without caring for the results. It is history that all were killed in the Bharata War except the Pancha-Pandavas. The Saivas would call Gita the *Book of Killing* and would not acknowledge it. This in no way detracts from the importance of the Gita to the entire Hindu community.

The sacred scriptures of the Hindus, the *Prasthanatraya*, are the three - the *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Gita*. Naturally each philosopher seeks to interpret the texts in his own way. The *Gita* has been the most popular through such interpretations. Mahatma Gandhi in the modern day has given his own interpretations of the *Gita*. He declares: "When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavad gita. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies - and my life has been full of external tragedies - and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavad gita."

Vyasa the legendary writer of the *Mahabharata* is considered to be the composer of the *Gita* also, in 18 chapters or discourses in 700 *slokas*. It forms as many chapters in the *Bhishma parva* of the *Mahabharata*. The date of the *Gita* is held to be the 5th century B.C. although there could have been many later alterations in it. It has been commented upon by many writers beginning from Sankara. Throughout the text Arjuna raises doubts and Bhagavan in the manner of answering his queries and clearing his doubts, expounds his philosophy. The last 19 verses of Chapter Two which describe a *sthita prajna* (a *jivanmukta* or perfect sage) had been caused to be sung by Gandhi in his ashram daily prayers. As in the *Kathopanishad*, the imparting of the Supreme Knowledge and course of action is placed here also in the most dramatic setting.

It is usual to divide the text into three sections, with six chapters to each; they are held to illustrate the three terms of the *Mahavakya* of the *Sama Veda*, 'Thou art that'. In this view the

first six chapters deal with the path of action without anxiety for the fruits thereof and the nature of *Thou* (*tvam*); the second six deal with devotion and the nature of *That* (*tat*); and the last six describe the state of the right knowledge and the nature of the idea *Art* (*asi*). These three are also held to be parallel to the Vedic concepts of *Karma*, (action), *Upasana* (devotion) and *Jnana* (knowledge); hence the Gita is also considered an upanishad, as it contains the essence of the knowledge of the Self.

The first chapter of the Gita is introductory, introducing the context of its genesis. The second is a summary of the whole teaching; selfless action devoid of desire for the fruits thereof is taught for the purification of the heart and devotion is taught to the more evolved persons to qualify them further for the highest *sannyasa* or disinterested action.

The Bhagavad gita is more a religious code than a mere philosophical treatise. Although it is both metaphysics and ethics, *brah-mavidya* and *yoga sastra*, it is not an esoteric work for the initiated, but a popular guide to help ordinary mortals to solve their problems in perplexing situations. Millions of the Hindu race have found solace for centuries in this great word of God which sets forth in simple and clear language the essential principles of a spiritual religion. The central teaching of the Gita is the attainment of release by the performance of one's *svadharma* or duty in life. Krishna's instruction to Arjuna resulted in the total annihilation of the race and so many today could not reconcile themselves to that teaching. But the context is something which is hard to visualize in this age and the divine purpose behind it is also one we could not fully comprehend now. But translated into a universal language, it means "Do your duty without an eye to the result thereof. God will take care of that. Action without attachmeni will purify your heart and this is the most essential qualification for attaining moksha (release)."

The Gita lives in the memory of some millions of people in India today and many of its words, Sanskrit though they be, are household words. "Relinquishing all dharmas, tak refuge in me alone. I shall liberate thee from all sins. Do not grieve."

This verse is the charama sloka for the Sri Vaishnavas. They have three supreme formulas, called *Tirumantram*, *Dvayam* and this *Charama slokam*. The theological writers have written at length on this sloka of the Gita.



## HINDU SOCIETY

Hindu society strove for the attainment of the four long cherished goals of life - *aram*, *porul*, *inbam* and *vidu* and this nowhere resulted in any problems or confrontations. Basic social virtues were held in great esteem. Manual labour was not looked down upon. People were generally god-fearing by nature and traditionally life revolved round religion and the temple. People lived in some sort of tribal groups, although there was a general cosmopolitan outlook. The village artisans were maintained by the village landed people and no one went without job or was left hungry. The society maintained not only its artisans of all types but also priests and artistes. There was a harmony of living, the haves sharing with the have-nots to some extent in a common bond of service to humanity. Cattle wealth was substantial. People lived in a kind of self-contained units.

Generally in all classes of society, the joint family system was in vogue. Here the oldest member was the head. Since all the people led a disciplined life, upholding certain basic values, this system did not cause any hardship to any one, until the impact of the west and the race for jobs started, toppling all social values and snapping family ties. Hindu society had been generally a patrilineal society. Property was divided among the male children and the female children had no legal right to the property.

Monogamy was the rule; but polygamy was there in society, but it was an exception. The idealized Tamil romantic poetry (*aham*) always upholds the concept of one man-one woman. The Ramayana pictures Rama as the *Ekapotnivrata*, the upholder of the principle of one wife, although his father had three wives.

Weddings were celebrated in the case of all higher class non-brahmins in the house of the bridegroom. It was then considered undignified to have it in the bride's house. But among the brahmins, it was the bride's parents who had to perform the ceremony in their house at their cost. This was because the bridegroom's people demanded high *varadakshirai* and attempted to fleece the bride's father as much as they could. In spite of anti-*varadakshinai* laws, this pernicious custom goes on as merrily as ever.

Usually the marriages were of the *kannika danam* type where the bride was given over to the bridegroom fully decked. This is analogous to the *Deiva manam* of the grammarians. Wedding is celebrated with *agni* as the witness. Going round with hands entwined, show of Arundati, the *Saptapati* mantras and the exchange of garlands sealed the wedding.

Child marriage was common in the distant past. This resulted in child widows. Happily these are only memories of the past, not perceptible in the modern day. Yet the *Dikshitar* in Chidambaram, the priests of the temple, practise child marriage for economic reasons. A married man has a right to offer worship in the temple and to a share in the temple food. Hence they are married while yet children, flouting all laws of the Indian Union.

As a rule women never re-married. The widows observed a life of austere widowhood devoting their time to the children of their sisters or brothers. Most of them led a life of devotion and service to the local temple. A widow was always held to be inauspicious and she was not admitted to any auspicious ceremony in the family. The widow could have no flowers, could wear no ornaments, no cosmetics etc. except the sacred ash. Tonsure of widowed women was not the rule. Smartha brahmins observed tonsure, while among the Vaishnava brahmins tonsure was taboo. White was the colour of the widow's sari among most communities but some had the red colour; other colours were usually barred.

Sati or the widow mounting the funeral pyre of her husband on his death and giving up her life, although practised in rare cases thousand years ago, did not exist in the society in the recent past.

After death the body was as a rule cremated. Pollution was observed for ten or fifteen days. Only sannyasis were buried.

Vratas or observances of important sacred days with fasting and vigil had been observed in society with prayers. These were instrumental in self-purification and in the development of the *satvika guna*, getting over the lesser *tamasa guna* and *rajasa guna*. In a religion-oriented society these indicate an attitude of natural submission of the Supreme will.

Schooling was at five years, the brahmins commencing their *upanayanam* or investiture of the sacred thread at the age of seven years. The teacher commanded the greatest respect in the village.

During auspicious occasions the Nagasvaram orchestra was played in the home. It was the usual accompaniment for the puja occasions in the temple and was invited for the domestic functions also. It was the compulsory *mangala isai*. Affluent people had organized a sadirkkacheri (bharata natya) and this was the only patronage which the dancer had, except the temple patronage.

All the people from the highest to the lowest were religious. They acquired joy and self-control besides compassion and fellow-feeling through religion.



## MONASTERIES

The Math (monastery) seems to have existed in Tamilnad as a religious and social institution for about 1500 years. In the very early periods it was known as *palli*, a term often applied to the religious centres of Jainism and Buddhism, temples, palaces and schools. Tiru Mular mentions seven *mathas* and their heads but they are not heard of in later literary or religious history. By the days of the Nayanmar we see that their very residences had been called maths obviously because the places accommodated their entire devotional troupes also. Again in the Chola periods we learn there were a number of maths but their continuity is lost.

Sankara (788-820) established four maths in North India at Sringeri, Puri, Dwaraka and Badari and they continue to propagate his *kevala advaita* cult to this day. Kanchi Kamakoti pitham is well known in Tamilnad and is said to be the place where he spent his last days and passed away.

After Ramanuja (1017-1137), a large number of Vaishnava maths sprang up and they diverged into the two distinct sects, the *Tenkalai* and the *Vadakalai* from about the latter half of the 14th century. Each of the sects has a number of maths presided over by their later disciples and acharyas and doing religious propaganda in the different areas.

The Saiva Siddhanta maths came into existence after Umapati Sivacharya, the fourth preceptor. Kachi Jnanaprakasar Math came after Sitrambala nadihal, third in the line after Umapati and had some importance in the days of Krishnadeva raya of Vijayanagar but afterwards it was as good as defunct.

Jnanasambandhar math of Madurai claims antiquity from the days of St. Tiru Jnanasambhandhar but the whole is obscure and doubtful. The late head Sri Somasundara swami was a popular figure, who set about re-converting and admitting into the Saiva society persons who had been converted into the other religions.

The main Saiva Siddhanta maths are the Tiru Avaduturai Adhinam founded by St. Namasivaya murti and Dharmapuram Adhinam founded by Guru Jnanasambandhar both in the 16th century. The former had not written any texts but some of his followers had written some valuable treatises to expound aspects of the Saiva theology. Guru Jnanasambandhar on the other hand had himself written many valuable treatises for Saiva Siddhanta. His followers have also written many important works. These two maths had been having a number of ascetic disciples and they have a number of Siva temples under their administration.

The math founded by Sivagara yogi at Suriyanarkoil was an enlightened seat which had produced valuable treatises in Sanskrit and in Tamil.

A disciple of Dharmapuram, St. Kumaraguruparar went to Banaras in the 17th century and established a monastery there; its head quarters were later shifted to Tiruppanandal and it is performing its charitable and religious functions from both the places.

The Saiva monasteries are usually headed by sannoyasis but a Vallal Adhinam in Sikali of the 14th century headed by a householder continued till the 20th century, when it faded out of existence.

Many Virasaiva Maths sprang up in the 17th century headed by realised Vira Saiva preceptors. Some of them are yet presided over by householders. The founders of all of them had written many theological treatises of considerable value. Perur Santhalinaswami, Porur Chidambaraswami, Kumara devar of Vridhachalam, Sivaprakasa swami of Turaimangalam, and Tirukovalur Jnaniyar are some important figures among them.

As the Sankara maths would not admit non-brahmins into their order, a few advaita maths founded by non-brahmins had sprung up. Unlike their brahmin counterparts who swear by Sanskrit, these cherish Tamil advaita sastras and have evolved in the course of less than 200 years fine expositions of the advaita philosophy in the Tamil language. The Koyilur math is an outstanding example.

The most glorious achievement in this field by all standards is the Sri Ramakrishna Math founded by Vivekananda and the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna at Belur. It is doing excellent service to the cause of religion by propaganda, publications in the Indian languages, relief work in areas affected by floods or cyclone, medical relief and educational work etc. Highly educated men of all castes and ranks join the math in a spirit of sacrifice and perform many humanitarian services. Their philosophy is the Sankara advaita and it is they that uphold the great eminence of the dedication and service of Sannyasa. Their services extend to many western countries and the far eastern countries also. Their service to the cause of advaita through interpretation of the Sanskrit classical texts is immense.

The name of Ramakrishna yet attracts people to its order of services. Such attraction is not there in any of the other classes of monasteries, where only very ordinary people go, not spiritually attracted, but only for material comforts.



## EDUCATION

Like all great cultured nations, India in the past had also bestowed great thought and attention on education. Unlike the other nations, education in India in the past had never been secular but God-oriented or spiritual. The goals of life had been laid down as the four – *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* (*aram*, *porul*, *inbam* and *vidu* – virtue, wealth, pleasure and release) and naturally all education was towards the realization of these ends. Education had to enable the pupil to learn what virtue was and lead a virtuous life, to acquire wealth by going the path of virtue, enjoy the pleasures of the world by virtuous means and ultimately to realize that these are all evanescent and therefore to attempt to liberate himself from all these and attain eternal joy. These goals were common to the Indian culture as a whole, whether North Indian or South Indian. The Vedas had long been taught by word of mouth and are even today taught from master to disciple, as it is not possible to learn the incantations through any written form.

The same had been the case with the Tamil language also, where all ancient writing on any subject was in verse and the student had to get by heart anything of importance, be it grammar, astrology or the sciences including philosophy. Writing came much later and we find the books laying great emphasis on the teacher-pupil relationship.

We know there had been great universities at Taxila and Nalanda in North India. The University was called a Sangham in Tamil nadu and there had been three such universities here in three different cities of the Pandiyas, over periods of several centuries. Complete details of only the third such university are now available. The following picture of education in Tamilnadu emerges.

The aim of education was the attainment of the four objectives of life *aram*, *porul*, *inbam* and *vidu*. Hence writers emphasized these objectives in their writing. The student was expected to develop powers of thinking and reasoning. Education for character was the most fundamental aim. Truth and Justice were held to be the eternal values to be attained through education. Bread winning was no aim of education. Sharing with the needy was almost axiomatic.

The letters and arithmetic and also music formed the content of education. The teacher was to be revered as God Himself. Staying with the teacher and eating the food given by him was the rule. There was no payment to the teacher

except in terms of service. The teacher's wife commanded equal respect. The pupil was always a bachelor wedded to the cause of learning. Humility, thirst for knowledge, cheerfulness and obedience were expected of him. Caste was no bar for learning.

The parents of course were the first teachers. It was their prime responsibility to shape him properly. Society also had a share in moulding his character. Both in the home and in the school, the rod was used, but love was held to be superior as a tool of education.

In the early periods there was no school as such. The teacher's house was the school and there were no fixed hours. The teacher would teach all the time. There were no holidays. But the convention was to exclude some days as not suited for learning. The number of pupils under one teacher was necessarily small.

Any age was suited for learning and education was thought to be from the cradle to the grave. Usually the *Vijayadasami* day was considered most auspicious for commencing learning.

All writing was on palmyrah leaf on which a steel stylus inscribed the learning material. No doubt palmyrah reading and writing were difficult and so all valuable matter was committed to memory. The teacher helped the child to learn. There was no compartmental arrangement of subjects but the three Rs., grammar and philosophy were the subjects most often taught. Women also learnt under masters and sex as such had no distinction in learning.

Physical education received good attention. There were several games suited for women. Music formed part of the training for both the sexes. Dance was a special preserve of women in the past and the threefold divisions of Tamil as *iyal* (poetry), *isai* (music) and *natakam* (dance) would indicate the importance given to the two arts, music and dance.

Education then did not mean mere literacy; it was taken to mean the harmonious development of all the three faculties in the integrated man – the integrated development of his body, mind and spirit. He was trained to have a sound body, as he was often required to fight for his country; he was given a sound moral training which helped to place society above the individual and made him treat the path of dharma; lastly he was trained to be a man of God, full of piety and devotion to the chosen Godhead.



## THE COW

The cow is traditionally one of the most ancient symbols of Hinduism. It had been the companion of primitive man, even long before he learnt the art of tilling the soil. The early cow had naturally pastures to graze on and man gave it protection from wild animals and shared his own roof with it against wind and rain. In return, the cow gave him milk and its males carried loads for him in his travel and, after wheels were invented, the male drew heavy loads, mounted over wheels, and served as his means of transport. It was harnessed to the plough for turning the sod but the cow is never used for ploughing or for drawing a cart, in most parts of India: in fact it is considered a sin to do so. The Hindus would consider cow slaughter and the eating of beef the most heinous of sins.

The cow was given a divine status where its five products, milk, curds and ghee and its urine and dung were used for Siva's abhisheka. The bull as the *Dharma devata*, an incarnation of Vishnu, is Siva's mount and His banner. No Sivalinga could be installed in the temple without the reclining bull in front.

The cow was deified in mythology as the Kamadhenu, the celestial cow and the giver of all desires. Dilipa an ancestor of Rama worshipped the Kamadenu and had all his wishes fulfilled. It was the desire to possess the Kamadhenu, that made the King Kausika, jealous of Vasishtha, embark on a great tapas and finally end up as a Brahma-rishi.

The cow is even today the first symbol of auspiciousness. Go puja is enjoined in the sastras to be performed after daily Siva puja. The day after Makara Sankranti is set apart as the day of *Mattuppongal*, *Go puja*, worship of the cow. For newly constructed houses, the first auspicious entrance is performed by taking a cow with its calf into the house and worshipping it. The owners enter the house after the cow.

The cow is the giver of the sacred ash, the first symbol of Lord Siva. Cow's dung is gathered in a certain manner, done into small cakes and burned. The resulting white ash is the sacred ash of Siva, which is distributed as His *prasaada*, gracious offering in all Siva temples, after His puja.

In the Saiva tradition we know how a cow rang the bell at the King's court and the King, Manunith Chola, learning that the cow's calf was run over by the chariot of his own son, himself rode his chariot over the same son, in order that he might share the cow's grief. The Tamil epic *Manimekhalai* tells the story of an illegiti-

mate child who was nurtured by a cow and later grew up to be a benefactor for mankind.

No one would like to harm a cow and so a code of cow protection was evolved for times of war. The warring chiefs would first capture the enemy's cows so that they came to no harm in the battle. Else they would by tom tom ask them to be removed to places of safety.

Cow's milk is considered the most wholesome food, from the infant to the invalid and it is also a complete food.

Gorochana (bezoar) is an aromatic substance used mostly in the treatment of infants' diseases, in the siddha system of medicine in Tamilnad. This is a substance which is found secreted in the stomach or intestines of the cow.

Cow dung in Hindu mythology is considered a purifier. Cow dung water is sprinkled on the open yards in front of Hindu households, swept over and kolam marked thereon as a sign of purification and adornment. Early poor people's houses were all built in mud and thatch; The smearing of cow dung on the floor and on the walls made them clean and free from any sort of vermin.

The cow's dung is now known to be the most excellent material to confer continued fertility to the soil. Advanced sciences have not invented any effective substitute for it. All the modern artificial fertilizers deplete the fertility of the soil unless organic manure in the form of cow dung is added. A fine legend from the Mahabharata highlights this fact. The general belief of the Hindus is that all the celestial beings reside on the various limbs of the cow, beginning from the tip of its horns to the hoofs. Once Lakshmi, the goddess of Prosperity, taking a short stroll in Vainkuntha saw a herd of cows lazily chewing the cud on a grassy meadow. She could not however find herself residing on any part of the cow's body. Calling an elderly cow which was lying nearby, she expressed her wish to stay on the cow's limbs. The cow referred Lakshmi's desire to the Parliament of Cows and returned to Lakshmi with the cows' decision. "Madam, you are so fickle, not staying anywhere permanently. If you agree to stay in any place we assign you then we shall have you." Lakshmi agreed. The cow then asked her to stay on the cow's dung and urine, which she is doing from that day. A fine legend indeed! It teaches the truth that cow's dung will enrich the fertility of the soil and result in prosperity. The cow's urine is well known as a specific to cure persistent scabies.



## STATUS OF WOMEN

One of the chief religious tenets of the Vaidika religion of India is that there is no difference in the nature of the souls and that all souls are equal. The Vedas considered men and women as alike, until the age of the smritis, which laid down a lower role for woman.

The three great forces - that of power, of prosperity or riches, and of knowledge, have been known as three Saktis - Malaimagal, Alaimagal and Kalaimagal (Uma, Lakshmi and Sarasvati) in the Tamil language. This is itself significant.

The lady of the house is the grahalakshmi. There is no corresponding term for the male counterpart. The very term symbolizes her legitimate role in society. Man has no competence to perform any ritual without his wife. A grahasta always means the man with his wife.

Modesty and chastity were held to be the greatest virtues. And no where in all history is there any piece of writing extolling those who had violated the standards of these virtues. Family life and the rearing of children were considered to be the prime duties of woman. But it was she who shaped the lives of the children, the rulers and warriors of the country. The Sangham poetry gives many graphic pictures of this trait. History tells us that it was the mother of Sivaji, Jijabai, who was responsible for evolving the personality of the young boy who later grew up to be a great national hero, who threw up the most powerful challenge to the Mughal empire, and who successfully modelled the Mahratta people into a nation.

A peculiar aspect of the family in India is the tension between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. This has been going on for several millennia and in the joint family set up which continues even in this age of the modern woman. The account of Sembiyan madevi in the days of the Chola empire in Tamilnadu offers a different picture. Her son Uttama Chola who was on the Chola throne (970-985) married five wives. All the five loved their mother-in-law not only dutifully, but also with a sense of great esteem and reverence. They had together given endowments to the Sembian madevi temple for the celebration of her birth day festival on the star *Kettai* in the month of *Citrai*.

Legends say that, in the dispute between Sankara and Mandana Misra, Bharati the wife of the latter was chosen as the judge by both of them. She had adjudged that her husband was the loser. This speaks volumes for her erudition, judgement and sense of

fairness. We find women officers to the appointed as the administrators in the Tiruvaiyaru temple, built by the Chola queen. They had equal power with the male officers appointed there. An inscription from Tiruvaiyaru records that a woman was then appointed in the days of Raja Raja to be a member of the village council for the administration of the village and its temple.

The Chola queens had the power to issue grants to temples in their own personal right. Raja Raja records in the Tanjavur inscriptions the 'endowments given by us and by our ladies (queens).

Queen Mangammal (1689-1706) in our own country had to fight many battles and rule the land on the death of her husband Chockanatha, the Nayak King. She was also a great administrator and people of Tamilnadu fondly cherish her memory through her many public benefactions, roads, *chatrams*, tanks and temples. The story of Tarabai, who undauntedly opposed Aurangazeb in 1700 is well known. Lakshmibai the Rani of Jhansi assumed queenship in 1835 at the young age of 18 when her husband died and led the Independence struggle against the British and died with a bullet wound in 1858 in the guise of a soldier.

The story of Alli of Madurai in Tamilnadu is one of the most famous legends. She was an amazon into whose state no man dared to enter. How she was won over by Arjuna with the help of Krishna is one of the most favourite ballad stories of Tamilnadu.

In Tamil literature, we have more than 30 poetesses in the Sangham age. Karaikkal ammai has sung the pure advaitic philosophy of the period in beautiful lyric poetry. An ordinary young house-wife of the Chola territory she had the unique honour or being called 'Mother' by the Supreme Siva who has no father and no mother. Who had not heard of Andal and her *bhakti* poetry which, in a later day evolved a Mirabai in Chittore in North India? Andal's *Tiruppavai* is part of the daily prayer book of the Vaishnavas to this day. Poetesses of the name of Avvai have been many from the Sangham age. The life of Queen Mangaiyarkkarasi (a canonized saint) is the story of a great diplomat. Without in the least swerving from her womanly duties to her husband the King, she was able to invite St. Jnanasambandhar to her city and to win over her husband and the entire kingdom back into the Saiva fold.

Woman in Tamilnadu and in India had been an equal partner with man, partaking of life in its varied facets of the home, public life, religion, the arts and so on, without in the least losing her prime function as the Light in the Home.



## FLOWERS

The culture of the Tamils is best represented by the flower symbol. In ordinary life, all occasions – private or public, home or temple – today require the use of flowers. This would only indicate that the people at all levels were living a life completely in tune with nature.

In classical Tamil poetry from the days of *Tolkappiyam* the flower has been the symbol of all life be it love or war. *Kurinji*, stood for the hilly region and symbolized the union of lovers. *Mullai* (jasmine) denoted the forests and symbolized dalliance. *Marutam*, the plains and separation of the lovers. *Neital* (the water lily) the coastal region and the forbearance of the lady in the absence of the lover. *Palai* is the desert region and the lament of the mother (usually) at the elopement of her daughter with her lover. Again poetry tells us that *mullai* is symbolic of chastity.

The crowned monarchs themselves had flowers as their emblems. The Sera had the palmyrah spathe; the Pandiyas the margosa flower and leaf; the Chola the bauhinia flower; the Pallava the tondai flower and leaf and so on.

Laurel is the great floral symbol for victory in war, and metaphorically in the English language laurel means victory not only in wars but in games, sports, and even educational contests. The Tamil language mentions *vahai* as the laurel in all spheres of victory and success.

Not only this: heroic poetry has been conventionalized into several themes in classical poetry (as we saw in the case of love) and there are floral symbols for each of the divisions of war poetry. War was declared with the seizure of the cattle from the enemy territory. The flower *vetchi* (*ixora*) symbolizes this. *Karandai* is the recapture of the cattle. *Vanji* the raid on the enemy land, the opposition to the raid is *kanji*. The siege of the enemy fort or camp is *ulijnai*, the holding of the fort against the enemy is *nochi* (*vitex nigundo*). The actual battle is *tumbai* and then of course the victor gains his *vahai* (or laurels). Here we have eight symbolic flowers large and small, each denoting one strategy in the war. The convention was that one engaged in these war activities had woven on his head or round his shoulders the corresponding flowers and leaves.

Flowers have the greatest place in religion and society in Tamil nad. In the Hindu pantheon, the flower is the most important perquisite with reference to any deity. It is well known that *tulasi* (basil) is the most favoured of Vishnu. His consort Lakshmi is

seated on the red lotus while Sarasvati, the Muse of Learning, is on the white lotus. The favourite flowers of Muruha are *Kadambu* and *vetchi* (*ixora*). Siva has generally *cassia* (*konrai*) along with *aatti* (*bauhinia*), *tumbai* and even the poisonous *datura*. *Aruhu* (hariali grass) is special to Ganesa as also the poisonous *erukku* (caleotropsis). Chrysanthemum is special to Siva at Tiruchirappalli. This leads us to the concepts of the *sthala vruksha* in Siva temples. Every temple has a special tree. In this concept of temple tree, not only large trees and flower-bearing trees, but even small shrubs and grass are included in order to inculcate in our minds that all are God's creation and that nothing, not even obnoxious plants as the above mentioned *datura* and *caleotropsis* are taboo.

The culture of cut-flower to deck a drawing room table or a platform podium is something which is anathema to the cultured Indian mind. We may recall the words of St. Tayumanavar:

When I go into the flower garden to gather some flowers  
For worshipping Thee, what do I see?  
I see Thee dwelling in every flower;  
How can I pluck a flower?

Such is the thinking of the cultivated mind which sees God in the flower.

The love darts aimed by Manmata (Cupid) are also flowers: they are five-the lotus, *asoka*, mango, jasmine and blue lily, aimed at different parts of the woman's body, and producing different emotions.

All temple worship is accompanied by flowers. Without flowers there is no *pūja* either in the home or in the temple. The decoration of the deity with many coloured flowers on festival occasions is something for the Gods to see. This decoration is an art that is continuously being practised in the temple by the priests and which no one else can perform. Similar is the decking of the bride for the wedding function.

Temple benediction on the devotee takes the form of flowers, sacred ash and *kumkum* or *tirttam* and sandal and also of food offered.

All social functions are occasions for the distribution of basketfuls of flowers to the visitors. Weddings are the greatest of such occasions. As also the *pūchuttal* function celebrated in the seventh month of the first pregnancy of a young girl in the family. Flowers are symbols of auspiciousness and good-will and any guest at any function is first treated to fragrant flowers and sandal.



## RIVERS

Rivers have been the background for the evolution of any civilization and culture any where in the world and Tamil Nad is no exception. The excavations at Mohenjadaro reveal to us a river valley civilization which flourished there many millennia ago and which investigators have identified as a proto-Dravidian one. The Ganges valley civilization is the Aryan civilization of a later period. In like manner, the civilization of the Tamil people can also be termed the product of many rivers.

The Tamil national poet Bharati has sung in one of his songs that the rivers Kaveri, Ten pennai, Palaru, Vaihai and Porunai have enriched the Tamil country. We shall just say a few words about each.

The submerged continent of Lemuria had two rivers Pahruli and Kumari but we know very little about them except the fact that they nourished 49 districts. But we are on surer ground when we reach the historical period of the Sangham age when the Third Tamil Academy was established in the modern city of Madurai on the banks of the river Vaihai. The river we may firmly say is wedded to the Tamil language. The Sangham poem *Paripadal* has many verses on the river.

In the contest between Saint Jnanasambandhar and the Jains, the water test was carried on here when the palm leaf placed by him went against the current, while the leaves placed by the Jains were all swept into the sea. The Vaihai was in floods in the story of St. Manikkavacakar in order to show his great devotion to the Pandiya king. The river figures prominently in the 64 exploits of Lord Sundaresa at Madurai.

Tambraparni, also a river of the Pandiyas, is celebrated in legend and literature. The famous Courtalam water falls are caused by the Chitra nadi, a tributary of Tambraparni. It is also mentioned as *Porunai*. It originates from the Podikai hill, the legendary abode of Sage Agastya. At Papanasam, it cascades into a depth of 200 feet, known as the *Kalyana tirttam*. Its waters are crystal clear and the river has many shrines on its banks.

Kaveri is the river of the Cholas from the ancient times, starting from Mercara in Coorg it goes through the Karnataka state, and then branching off into numberless streams, it irrigates the entire Chola country, thereby earning for the land the title 'granary of South India.'

According to Tamil legends, Ganesa titled the water pot of Sage Agastya in order to irrigate the flower garden of Indra at

Sikali and the Ganges water contained therein flowed as the Kaveri. Kaveri is also celebrated as the daughter of Sage Kavera and hence her name Kaveri. After stopping at many dams on the way, it has a confluence with the sea at Kaverippattinam, (Pumpuhar of Sangham poetry fame) which term itself takes its name from Kaveri. That city was the port and capital city of the Chola Emperors two thousands years ago.

The Karnataka state has constructed numerous dams across the river in many places to store its waters and irrigate their land. But there were three dams on the river in Tamilnad from an earlier period. The *upper dam* is at Elamanur to the west of Tiruchi, a little ahead of the place where the Kollidam branches off from the Kaveri. Here Kaveri is about a mile broad. Then further down from Sri Rangam we have the Grant Anicut (called *Kallanai*) constructed by the Chola Emperor Karikal Chola over 2000 years ago, and still going strong and discharging its original function. Further down, a new dam was placed on Kollidam the branch of Kaveri in the last century to stop its surplus waters and it is also now functioning, known as the Lower Anicut.

Seringapattam in Karnataka and Sri Rangam in Tiruchirappalli are two Vishnu shrines situated on the islands within the Kaveri round which the river flows in two branches. The first is the fort where Tippu Sultan lost his life in the battle with the British. The second Sri Rangam, is Koil, the most important shrine for all Vaishnavas. Many of the Vaishnava acharyas lived here and propagated their cult.

The Kaveri is the symbol of the architectural and sculptural arts of the Tamil people. It was also the birth place of the arts of music and dance. Thousands of Siva and Vishnu temples dot its banks and the banks of its branches dug up by successive Chola monarchs.

The South Pennar goes through a few Tamil nad districts. Only occasionally there is water in it for a day or two. This river is celebrated in Tamil literary legends in the story of Avvai and her attempts to arrange the wedding of the two daughters of Paari, where she caused the river Pennar to flow with milk, ghee and curds and a felled piece of palmyrah tree to come to life and yield fruits.

Palaru is the river flowing through the Chingleput district and though very broad, it never carries any water. Sekkilar with a rare sense of humour remarks that this river could give a supply of water only to the extent the people dig in its sands!



## HINDUISM

We have had in the previous pages a peep into the many facets of Hinduism and its culture down the centuries. We shall now attempt a summary of all that and try to define what Hinduism stands for. We need no longer fight shy of the term Hinduism – it includes in its broad signification all the religions and philosophies that were in the early periods, that continue to be today, and that may crop up in the future in the ancient land of Bharata.

Hinduism is a philosophical religion. Where philosophy, religion and perhaps science are tight compartments in the western world, it is correct to say that Hinduism is a happy blend of these for the Hindu here. Hinduism is both a theory-philosophy, and practice-religion. One does not exclude the other but gets a wholeness and completion by the other. The average unlettered Hindu, has a practical concept of what is right and what is evil and has an instinct to avoid the latter and go the path of the former because he knows intuitively that that is the god-ordained path. Hinduism is today kept alive only by such people and not by the so-called educated and sophisticated persons. It is a hard pill to swallow if we say that all the ills in society are the creation of the sophisticated and educated people, but that is the fact. Either out of fear or out of love, the uneducated man likes to show obeisance to his God and this is today the backbone of Hinduism.

Hinduism believes in *pratyaksha* (perception), *anumana* (inference) and *agama* (scriptural faith). It has implicit faith in the *sastras*. It explains the inequalities in life by its theory of *karma* and rebirth: this belief keeps it optimistic and does not allow it to slide into pessimism. Hindu philosophy has its expression in temples, market places, river banks and even the places of death, not merely in pulpits. Hinduism is an affair of every day, not merely of Sunday sermons.

Hinduism is a universal religion. It satisfies the nobler needs of man's spirit-logical, ethical, social and religious. There is a unity in its variety or diversity. It has not been standardized. Man is free to think, believe and act. This element is taken note of by Hinduism. The multiplicity of its deities was most possibly evolved in the course of centuries to satisfy this requirement of peoples of different temperaments for a personal god. Recognizing certain basic truths like good and evil, karma and rebirth, the characteristics of the Supreme God as Love and Truth, man can stray as far from the centre as he may like.

Hinduism does not train fanatics and bigots. It accepts the

possibility of other religions being also pathways to God and so does not say, this and not that. Sects may be many and they may differ, but the God of all the sects can be only one.

This universality fosters tolerance. Tolerance does not mean indifference. Gandhi was the most luminous example of this spirit of tolerance. He was prepared to allow winds from all quarters to blow about him but refused to be swept off his feet. The tolerance of Hinduism is born out of its strength and conviction and is not to be interpreted as the path of least resistance or weakness. Again it is not an eclectic religion, taking some good points from the others. While the other religions as a matter of fact grew up from its own womb on the Indian soil, it is gracious enough to acknowledge them, at the same time continuing in its own *santana* faith. It hates wickedness but loves the offender in whom also it believes there is a spark of the divine and hopes to transmute even hatred or evil by the alchemy of evil.

Hinduism is of course Vedanta; but Vedanta is not a single one; it is many, differing in details but one in essentials. It believes that as all of them are trying to probe into the unknown where the word and the mind cannot reach, one need not decry the other so long as the probing goes on in good faith, proper reasoning and humility and love.

The characteristic feature of Hinduism is its harmony of life and thought. There are the various asramas, like the householder and the ascetic, the various rituals in the home and in the temple, festivals and ceremonies. The religion does not perceive any jarring note in any of these. The religion holds both the states *grahasta* and *sannyasi* in equal esteem. One is not exclusive of the other. What is important is how life is lived; not the order itself. It has the lasting welfare of society at heart and so has fixed the duty of supporting all on the householder. Life itself is no negation. It has positive goals. The *sannyasi* may have his own spiritual upliftment at heart; at the same time, he has the unwritten duty of raising to a higher level the society which produced him.

Now in the house and in the temple, there is an integration of all spheres of activity, music and dance, devotional outpourings, artistic performance of the various steps, an esoteric significance in all the steps and also a full social involvement at every stage. There results amidst all the great din and uproar an atmosphere of peace and solace, dispelling gloom and discord. The All-pervasive nature of God, which the Hindu is taught to realise in every one of the rituals, implants in his being this solace and illumination.



## PILGRIMAGES

The Indian considers himself a pilgrim through life. The final goal of life is *vidu* (*moksha*) and the whole life is a search for the real *guru* who could help to achieve this. Tayumanavar in a later day said that to one who made a regular pilgrimage to the holy shrines, *tirttas* and deities, the Supreme Guru would appear to give him the instruction of the One Word. Company of godly men is enjoined in the sastras. So pilgrimages have this triple purpose-visit to shrines, company of godly men and search for the guru.

All people flock to Banaras at all seasons to have a dip in the Ganges and have a darsan of Visvanatha, The temple of Kasi is very small and the rituals there leave much to be desired but perhaps this very fact is responsible for its supreme holiness. Darsan at Kasi is not complete without a dip in the sea at Ramesvaram and so we find in turn thousands of people from the north, going to Ramesvaram. This has brought about an integration which no amount of political awakening could have done.

People have to brave a number of new conditions-weather and climate, food, dress, language, way of life, discomforts of travel, – but yet the pilgrimages go on. Of the seven shrines which could confer *mukti*, one is Kanchi of Tamilnad; of the seven most holy rivers, daily mentioned before a bath, one is the Kaveri of Tamilnad. Of the many Jothir lingas, Effulgent Lingas. some are in Tamilnad. There is a sort of spiritual hunger in the general mass of the people which only these pilgrimages could satisfy. These are truly pilgrimages from worldliness to godliness.

Devotees are enjoined visit the birth places of the Nayanmar and the Alvar and the places where they attained beatitude; the same with the places of the Acharyas. Again such great festivals as Ardra darsanam at Chidambaram, Vaikuntha Ekadasi at Sri Ranganam, Karttikai dipam at Tiru Annamalai, Tula muzhukku at Mayuram, the five tandava sthalas of Nataraja, the great hill shrines of Muruha, Tiruppati or seven Hills, the five Siva shrines dedicated to the five Elements, – the list goes on endlessly. And it is remarkable that the occasions for such visit are the distributed over the 12 months with sufficient spacing in time for travel.

Bhakti, a vision of the glories of nature, kinship with unfamiliar people, participation in festivals - these are some of the resultant benefits to the individual helping him to realize the All-pervasiveness of the Supreme and giving him a feeling of oneness with all creation. The saying *Asetu-Himachalam* becomes a reality.

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